



WHY SHOULD YOU GET A BUILDING PERMIT?

Frequently Asked Questions About Permits and Remodeling Homes

Q I am planning a remodel of my home. Why should I get a building permit?

A This is a question many people may ask themselves when planning alterations to their home. A decision not to get a permit could be very costly. Some homeowners are finding when they try to sell or refinance their home, prospective buyers or lending institutions want proof that alterations are in compliance with local codes. Without a permit and inspection on record, there is no proof. The homeowner must then apply for a permit with no guarantee that the remodel will meet the codes, and they face the possibility that the remodel must be redone or removed. This is costly and frustrating and could cause delays in refinancing or a lost sale of their home.

Q Do I need a permit for everything I do to my home?

A No, not all items require permits. The following is a list of items that do not require a permit. (Please note, even though a permit is not required, the project must still comply with all the applicable construction and zoning codes. Always check with the Planning Division for additional setback and height restrictions.)

Permits are not required for the following when related to single family homes which do not encroach over a subsurface drain system, public utility easement, or into required setbacks from property lines:

Buildings

- Nonhabitable one-story detached accessory structures (storage structures, playhouses, etc.) provided the floor area does not exceed 200 square feet or a height of ten feet measured from the finished floor to the average height of the roof surface;
- Fences not over seven feet high (not over eight feet for open chain link or woven wire fences), unless required for barriers around swimming pools (a swimming pool barrier is required for any swimming pool, hot tub, spa, or similar structure intended for swimming, recreational bathing, or immersion that contains water over 24 inches in depth);
- Retaining walls that are not over four feet in height measured from the bottom of the footing to the top of the wall unless supporting a surcharge (a surcharge is a load on the wall that is created by any one of the following: any height wall supporting a slope behind it that exceeds 4:1 [i.e. every 4 feet horizontal the slope exceeds 1 feet vertical]; any combination of a fence on top of a retaining wall that exceeds four feet in height; any height of retaining wall where a separate fence is closer to the retaining wall than the height of the retaining wall [i.e. a fence located less than three feet to a three-foot high retaining wall, fence located less than two feet to a two-foot high retaining wall etc.] or any height retaining wall supporting a surcharge [i.e. a retaining wall built

adjacent to a structure or parking area where the surcharge of the structure or vehicle parking would be imposed on the wall]);

- Water tanks supported directly upon the ground if the capacity does not exceed 5,000 gallons, and the ratio of height to diameter or width does not exceed 2 to 1;
- Private concrete sidewalks, slabs, and driveways not more than 30 inches above adjacent grade and not over any basement or story below;
- Painting, papering, tiling, carpeting, cabinets, countertops, interior wall, floor or ceiling covering, and similar finish work;
- Prefabricated swimming pools where the pool walls are entirely above the adjacent grade. Barrier requirements are not exempt;
- Swings and other playground equipment accessory to a one- or two-family dwelling;
- Patio and porch covers not over 200 square feet and supported by an exterior wall;
- Window awnings supported by an exterior wall which do not project more than 54 inches from the exterior wall and do not require additional support;
- Nonbearing partitions (walls) except when such partitions create habitable rooms (habitable rooms are those used for living, sleeping, eating or cooking);
- Replacement or repair of siding not required to be fire resistant;
- Retrofitted insulation;
- Masonry repair;
- Porches and decks where the floor or deck is not more than 30 inches above the adjacent grade at any point and where in the case of a covered porch, the covered portion of the porch does not come closer than three feet to property lines;
- Gutters and downspouts;
- Door and window replacements (where no structural member is changed);
- Reroofing except in wildfire hazard zones or where replacement or repair of roofing does not exceed 30 percent of the required live load design capacity and is not required to be fire resistant;
- Plastic glazed storm windows; and
- Framed-covered non-habitable accessory buildings not more than 500 square feet in area, one story in height, and not closer than three feet to the property line, where the structure is composed of a rigid framework that supports a fabric membrane.

Electrical

Repairs and maintenance: A permit shall not be required for minor repair work including the replacement of lamps or the connection of approved portable electrical equipment to approved permanently installed receptacles.

Mechanical (Heating, Ventilation, and Air Conditioning)

- Portable heating appliances, cooking or clothes drying appliances;
- Portable ventilation appliances;
- Portable cooling units;
- Steam, hot, or chilled water piping within any heating or cooling equipment regulated by the code;
- Replacement of any minor part that does not alter approval of equipment or make such equipment unsafe;
- Portable evaporative coolers;
- Self-contained refrigeration systems containing ten pounds or less of refrigerant or that are actuated by motors of one horsepower or less; and

- Portable-fuel-cell appliances that are not connected to a fixed piping system and are not interconnected to a power grid.
- Other portable appliances, such as freezers, washing machines, refrigerators, portable barbecue grills, etc.

Plumbing

The stopping of leaks in drains, water, soil, waste, or vent pipe; provided, however, that if any concealed trap, drainpipe, water, soil waste, or vent pipe becomes defective and it becomes necessary to remove and replace the same with new materials, such work shall be considered as new work, and a permit shall be obtained and inspection made as provided in the code.

The clearing of stoppages or the repairing of leaks in pipes, valves, or fixtures, and the removal and reinstallation of water closets (toilets) provided such repairs do not involve or require the replacement or rearrangement of valves, pipes, or fixtures.

Repairs

Application or notice to the Building Official is not required for ordinary repairs to structures, replacement of lamps, or the connections of approved portable electrical equipment to approved permanently installed receptacles. Such repairs shall not include the cutting away of any wall, partition, or portion thereof, the removal or cutting of any structural beam or load bearing support, or the removal or change of any required means of egress, or rearrangement of parts of a structure affecting the egress requirements; nor shall ordinary repairs include addition to, alteration of, replacement or relocation of any water supply, sewer, drainage, drain leader, gas, soil, waste, vent, or similar piping, electric wiring, or mechanical or other work affecting public health or general safety.

Q Don't permits cost thousands of dollars?

- A Not necessarily. A new home has far more fees associated with it than remodels because of development fees. These development fees are not charged each time that an alteration is made.

Building permit fees are based on the value (construction costs including materials and typical labor costs) of the work to be done. As an example, an alteration with a value of \$10,000 would have a building permit fee (including plan review) of around \$225. Each person will have a different view of what is and is not expensive; however, a few hundred dollars may save thousands in the future. Other permits such as plumbing, electrical, and mechanical (heating and cooling) have fees based on the number and type of installations.

Q What if I have made an alteration to my home without realizing I needed a permit and I want to correct the situation? Will I be subject to a fine? Do I have to tear the whole project down and start over?

- A Penalties can be levied for those who refuse to comply with the law. The Building Division would rather see a building conform to the code than punish a homeowner. If a homeowner discovers that they did not obtain a permit when required, they do not necessarily have to tear the project down and start over. If the alteration can meet the applicable codes, they will be approved. Our inspectors won't necessarily approve

something they cannot see and may require small sections of wall or roof covering be removed to verify the construction meets the code. There can be no guarantee that some changes may need to be made, and some may not be easy to accomplish.

Q What is the purpose of the permits and codes?

A The purpose behind building codes is to give reasonable assurance that a home is safe from structural failure, fire hazards from electrical and heating systems, electrical shock, and health risks. The permits provide a permanent record of the work performed and inspections conducted on the project.

Q If I take out a permit to remodel a home built ten years ago, do I build to the code in effect when the home was originally built?

A No. The new work must be constructed under the codes in effect today.

Q If I remodel my house, do I have to bring the entire home up to the codes in effect today?

A No. Only the new portion being remodeled must meet the current codes unless it creates a hazard for the existing building such as overloading an existing beam.

Q Why should I use a licensed contractor?

A For one thing, any contracted person doing work who is not currently registered with the State Construction Contractors Board is doing so illegally. Would you want this type of person working on your home? Another reason is the registration provides some protection to the homeowner from being charged for work and materials not provided or paying twice for them (material suppliers and subcontractors can place a lien on your home if they do not receive payment from your contractor). There are also trade licenses for those persons doing plumbing and electrical work to provide some assurance that they have adequate knowledge and training in those fields.

Q Do I have to have a license to do work on my own home?

A No. A homeowner *(who owns and occupies the house) may do any or all of the work (building, plumbing, mechanical [heating and air conditioning], and electrical). If you are not sure of your abilities to do any or all of the work, it is recommended that you hire a licensed professional.

*This does not apply to plumbing and electrical work done by renters, landlords, their employees, or other persons who do not own and occupy the home (they must have an appropriate license).

Q How long does it take to get a permit?

A The length of time varies depending on the complexity of the project. The Building Division has a staff member available Monday through Friday, from 7:30 a.m. - 9 a.m. and 1:30 p.m. - 2:30 p.m. or by appointment to review small, simple projects "over the counter." This means you can come in and leave with a permit (taking approximately one-half hour). It may take other more complex projects up to two weeks before they are reviewed.

Some permits can be handled through the mail or by our counter staff (such as water heater replacement, air conditioners, lawn irrigation backflow prevention devices, simple electrical permits, and wood and pellet stoves).

Q Do I have to have my plans drawn by a Professional Designer, Architect, or Engineer?

A No. The owner or anyone they choose may draw the plans as long as they are clear and detailed enough to indicate what and how the project will be built. In some cases, the complexity of the project may require the skills of a professional. If the plans include the need for new beams, lateral support (earthquake or wind resistance), and they are not designed using standard software or prescriptive designs obtained from the building code, an engineer or architect will need to provide calculations for those items.

Q If I am having my project done by a licensed contractor, should I rely on my contractor to get the permits?

A Often there is a misunderstanding between the contractor and owner as to who is responsible for obtaining the permits. Be sure it is clear who is responsible. If the contractor were to be responsible for obtaining the permits, it would be wise to have the contractor provide proof they did so. The owner will ultimately be responsible for the work on their property.

Q Why do I need inspections? Do I have to pay for these inspections?

A Inspections are required at various stages of the project to see that the work is following the approved plans and codes. There is no additional charge for the inspections. They have been paid for with the permit fees.

Q How do I get an inspection?

A To request an inspection, call the City Inspection Request Line (526-2400). Please leave the following information: Address of the job site, the permit number, the type of inspection needed, contractor or contact person, and a contact telephone number. Inspection requests received before 7:00 am will normally be done that same day. Requests received after 7:00 am will be done the following workday. The Building Division will try to accommodate requests by homeowners to schedule a time for the inspector to meet them when necessary.

Q When do I need an electrical permit?

A Electrical permits are required any time electrical wires are directly connected to the house electrical system, such as a new light fixture or electrical outlet. This includes extending wires off an existing circuit. Low voltage wiring such as security systems or stereo wiring also requires a permit. Permits are not required for replacing a fuse or repairing an appliance cord.

Q When do I need a plumbing permit?

A A plumbing permit is required to install or replace any plumbing fixtures such as a sink, water heater, or lawn irrigation system. A permit is also required if additional water or waste piping is installed or repaired.

Q When do I need a mechanical permit?

A A mechanical permit is required for the installation or modification of any heating or cooling system, such as an air conditioner (except models designed to be installed in a window and plugged into an electrical outlet) or furnace.

Q What if complying with a code is too costly, difficult, or I don't agree with the code? Can the City waive the requirement?

A No, codes cannot be waived. However, if an alternate way of building something is proposed and will provide the same degree of safety as what the code requires, it may be approved as an alternate method by the Building Official.

If you have further questions, please call the Building Division at (503) 526-2403.