

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

BUILDING PERMITS

What is the purpose of permits and codes?

- The purpose behind building codes is to give reasonable assurances 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.
- When issuing a permit we also verify that the contractor has a valid contractor's license with the Washington State Department of Labor & Industries. On occasion we discover a contractor's license has been suspended. This protects the homeowner.
- Also, some homeowners are finding when they try to sell or refinance their home that prospective buyers or lending institutions want proof that alterations were performed in compliance with local codes. Without a permit and inspection on record there is no proof.

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

- **No** 😊
- These do not require a permit:
 - One-story detached accessory structure that don't exceed 200 square feet including tool and storage shed, playhouse and similar uses
 - Fences not over six feet high (see [fence section](#))
 - Retaining walls that are not over four feet in height measured from the bottom of the footing (*even if buried*) to the top of the wall, unless supporting a surcharge (*any added weight, like a fence, patio or structure*)
 - Water tanks supported directly upon *grade* if the capacity does not exceed 5,000 gallons and the ratio of height to diameter or width does not exceed 2 to 1
 - Sidewalks and driveways. If you are constructing stairs, it will require a permit.
 - Painting, papering, tiling, carpeting, cabinets, counter tops and similar finish work
 - Prefabricated swimming pools that are less than 24 inches (*may require to be fenced*)
 - Swings and other playground equipment
 - 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
 - Decks not exceeding 200 square feet in area *if* they are not more than 30 inches above *grade* at any point, are not attached to a *dwelling* and do not serve the exit door required by Section R311.4.
- *Please note:* even though a permit is not required, the project must still comply with all applicable construction and zoning codes.

Do my plans have to be drawn by a professional designer, architect, or engineer?

- Maybe.
- 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 constructed.
- In some cases, the complexity of the project may require the skills of a professional.
- If you are dealing with roofs, trusses, complex support braces, assume you will need them engineered.

Why should I use a licensed contractor?

- In Washington State, all contractors who perform work, bid or advertise in this state must be registered with the Department of Labor and Industries, post a bond, and carry general liability insurance.
- 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 (any supplier of materials, workers and subcontractors can place a lien on your home if they do not receive payment from your contractor).
- Dissatisfied consumers may pursue restitution in court against a contractor's bond.
- There are also trade licenses for those persons doing plumbing and electrical work to provide some assurances that they have adequate knowledge and training in those fields.
- Visit the [Department of Labor and Industries](#) website to learn more or check if a contractor's license is valid.

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

- No. A homeowner may do any or all of the work.
- If you are not sure of your abilities to do any work, it is recommended that you hire a licensed professional.
- If you are building a house in order to sell it within the next year, you do need to have a contractor's license. Visit the Department of Labor and Industries website to learn.

If I hire a licensed contractor, who is responsible to get the permits?

- Property owners or a registered contractor may purchase a permit for work to be done.
- **Be wary** of contractors who asks you to get the building permit or refuse to sign for the permits. In most instances, if you have hired a contractor, the contractor is required to take out the permits. Permits are your protection and help ensure that work will meet local building codes.
- When issuing a permit we also verify that the contractor has a valid contractor's license with the Washington State Department of Labor & Industries. On occasion we discover a contractor's license has been suspended. This protects the homeowner.
- Also, make sure that all inspections required under the permit are conducted. Sometimes contractors don't call for inspections, and without a final inspection the work is not signed off and the permit will expire.

What are the basic design requirements for the City of Fircrest?

- Wind Speed: 80
- Snow Load: 25 psf
- Seismic Zone: 3

DO I NEED A PERMIT TO...

... re-roof my house?

- Yes. The cost of a re-roof permit for a one-family dwelling is \$54.50; a duplex is \$56.50.
- It also requires a final inspection.
- You will need to ensure the venting is brought up to code.
- You may only have two layers of roofing.

... put up a fence?

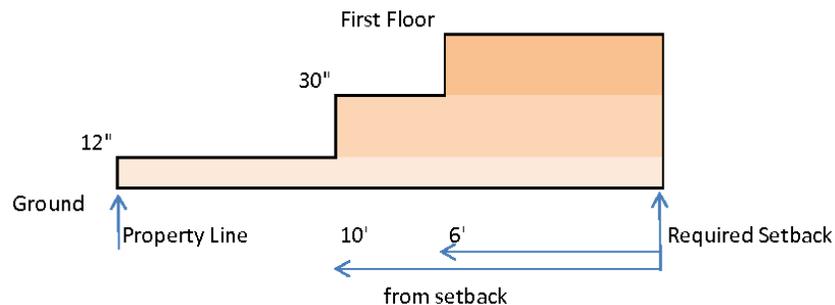
- A fence review application is required for the construction of a fence located within the front yard setback, yards along streets (this includes corner lots and lots where rear yards abut a street), and in clear vision triangles.
- Fence reviews are free.
- A fence review is not required for the normal upkeep, repair or maintenance of an existing fence or a fence that does not fall into the above categories.
- A fence can be constructed anywhere on private property.
- Fence appearance and maximum height requirements:
 - Front yard: Four feet, with a surface area that is no more than 50 percent obstructed (50% opacity). i.e. picket fence
 - Interior side and rear yard: Six feet solid plus one foot of lattice
 - Side street side yard: Six feet solid
 - Clear vision triangle: Two feet, six inches above centerline grades of intersecting streets
- See [22.58.004](#)

... build a storage shed?

- Accessory buildings include sheds, detached garages, greenhouses or similar structures.
- A permit is required for an accessory building that is greater than 200 sf.
- Structures 200 sf or smaller do not require a building or planning permit, but must meet the planning standards.
- The maximum size of an accessory building, without a [conditional use permit](#) is 600 sf. The maximum wall height is 10 feet. The maximum building height is 18 feet.
- The front yard setback is the same as that which is specified for the principal residential structure. (For most houses this is 20 or 25 feet depending on the zoning.)
- The interior side yard setback is three feet if the building is to be located more than 50 feet from the front property line. If not, the minimum interior side yard setback is five feet.
- A wall less than 5' from the property line must be the equivalent of a one hour fire wall.
- Accessory buildings may not take up more than 1000 sf or 10% of the lot area (whichever is less).
- A conditional use permit would allow an accessory building as large as 800 sf, with a wall height of 12 feet, and a ridge height of 21 feet. This process requires a hearing before the Planning Commission and notification to neighbors.
- See [22.58.003](#) for the specific code.

... building a deck in the rear yard?

- A deck permit is not required if the deck:
 - does not exceed 200 square feet in area
 - is not more than 30 inches above grade at any point, **and**
 - is not attached to a dwelling and does not serve the exit door required by Section R311.4.
- Whether you need a permit or not, the setback standards must be met.
- Uncovered patios, decks, stairs and landings may encroach into required yards based on their height above finished grade or floor level, as follows:
 - If the deck is less than or equal to 12 inches above finished grade it may extend to the property lines
 - If the deck is more than 12 inches and less than or equal to 30 inches above finished grade it can encroach ten feet into the required front and rear yards, six feet into the side street side yard, and two feet into the interior yard
 - If the deck is more than 30 inches above finished grade, and less than or equal to the floor level of the first floor, it can encroach six feet into the required front and rear yards
 - If the deck is greater than the floor level of the first floor, encroachments are not permitted



- See [22.58.002](#) for the specific code.

WHAT IF...

... I am planning to remodel my home?

- Building permits and inspections are required by state and local laws to confirm that minimum building standards have been met and that no fire/life/safety issues exist.
- Use our [residential permit packet](#) for additions or remodels to get started.

... I made an alteration to my home without realizing I needed a permit?

- If you discover your project should have had a permit, come in and talk with us.
- Penalties can be levied for those who refuse to comply with the law, but the City would rather see a building conform to the code than punish a homeowner.
- You will 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 can't necessarily approve something they cannot see and may require small sections of a 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.
- Occasionally, the inspector may require an engineer to certify the project if approved plans were not used for the original project.

... I take out a permit to remodel a home that was constructed ten years ago, do I build to the code in effect when the home was originally constructed?

- The new work must be constructed under the current codes in effect today.
- The City and State have adopted the 2012 International Building Codes and 2012 International Residential Codes.

... I remodel my house, do I have to bring the entire home up to the current code?

- Only the new portion must meet the current codes unless the remodel creates a hazard for the existing building, such as overloading an existing beam.
- Substantial remodel may require upgrade or installation of smoke detectors and carbon monoxide detectors to meet current safety regulations.

PLANNING

What is the difference between a planning permit and a building permit?

- Planning (or development) regulations and permits deal with the use (*house, church, coffee shop, pig farm, medical office*), location, and design of real property and improvements.
- Building codes and permits deal with how a structure is to be constructed to reasonably assure the project is safe and secure.
- In short: Planning deals with what can be built. Building deals with how it can be built.

What's a Comprehensive Plan?

- The Comprehensive Plan is a document established to guide the overall growth and development of a community and is required by the State of Washington under the Growth Management Act.
- Within the Comprehensive Plan are land use designations that provide an overall intent for areas of the City. The categories include various densities of residential, types of commercial, open space, and public facilities.

What is my property's zoning and what does that mean?

- Zoning districts are established to implement the City's Comprehensive Plan. Think of them as sub-categories and they give specific development regulations to direct the overall plan.
- The zoning development regulations direct the uses allowed, the size of lots and structures, and the design of those improvements. This would include setbacks, height limits, and upkeep.
- To determine your property's zoning district locate your property on the [zoning map](#). Then, look up the zoning regulations in our [zone code](#), which is Title 22 in the [Fircrest Municipal Code](#). Or, call the Planning Department and we can email the information directly to you.

What is a conditional use permit?

- While some uses are outright allowed or outright prohibited, other uses may be allowed as a conditional use due to the fact it may put extra demands on or affect nearby properties.
- Before a conditional use permit can be issued a public hearing must be held before the planning commission where they will:
 - Determine that the location and characteristics of these uses will be compatible with uses permitted in the surrounding area; and
 - Make further stipulations and conditions that may reasonably ensure that the intent of this title will be served.
- See [22.68](#) for the specific code.

What is the difference between a conditional use and a variance?

- A conditional use is a special use that might have greater impact on the neighborhood or community than the primary intent. The key word is use. Operating a bed and breakfast, assisted living facility, or large day-care center would all be conditional uses in a residential zone. The process allows the planning commission to examine any conflicts and provide conditions to lessen the impact on neighborhoods.
- A variance is an exception to the existing development standards. Standards include setbacks, height, lot size, and square footage of structures. A variance requires proving an exception is needed because of unusual circumstances.

I want to build something and it doesn't comply with the development regulations, can't I just get a variance?

- A variance is an exception to the development regulations.
- There are two types of variances – minor and major.
- A minor variance is reviewed by the Planning Department and the request can be no more than 10 percent reduction of the standard.
- A major variance is greater than ten percent and requires a hearing before the Planning Commission.
- Variance approval is rare since an applicant must show there are special circumstances and must meet a strict set of criteria.
- See [22.74](#) for the specific code.

MORE CONSUMER RESOURCES:

Office of the Attorney General: <http://www.atg.wa.gov/>

Better Business Bureau: <http://www.bbb.org>

Washington State Department of Labor and Industries: <https://fortress.wa.gov/lni/bbip>