

# BUILDING PERMIT BASICS

## ANSWERS TO THE MOST COMMONLY ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT THE ONE AND TWO FAMILY BUILDING PERMIT PROCESS

### What is a building permit and why is it required?

A building permit is a document that grants legal permission to begin construction of a building project. It also represents a contractual agreement between the homeowner and the city that all work performed will meet or exceed the minimum standards established by the City of Wauwatosa's Municipal Code and the State of Wisconsin's Administrative Code. A building permit is required in order to ensure these standards are met in order to protect the health, safety and welfare of the public.

### What do I need to apply for a building permit?

All permit applications are completed through Wauwatosa's self service portal online: <https://services.wauwatosa.net/permits>. The online portal will prompt you to submit the required documentation.

### Why do I need a survey and how can I obtain one?

Surveys are required to ensure that your project complies with today's zoning codes and is the best way to avoid property boundary disputes with neighbors. Also, the area of a lot that may be built upon varies by address as do building setback requirements. Contact the Planning Department for setback information (414) 479-8957.

If you don't have an accurate survey, check the Milwaukee County website to see available surveys:

<https://data-mclio.hub.arcgis.com/datasets/f339ebff4e7d460a9a48e002b85f5ce0/explore>.

Otherwise, the services of a qualified Land Surveyor should be obtained.

### How long does it take to get the permit?

The best way for you to expedite the plan review process is to submit all required documents and information at the time of permit application. When scheduling, please allow two weeks for the plan review process. If your project includes modifications to the exterior which will require Design Review, or other City approvals, additional time may be required.

Our office will contact the applicant when the permit is ready for issue and if any additional fees are due.

### When is Design Review required?

Design Review is required when the proposed scope of work changes the exterior look of a house. The purpose of this review is to promote good design and continuity, which often impacts the overall appearance and property value of a neighborhood. This review happens at the same time as building plan review during the permit application process.

For more information, visit our website at

[www.wauwatosa.net/government/departments/building-safety](http://www.wauwatosa.net/government/departments/building-safety)

Please email the Building and Safety Division at [tbuilding@wauwatosa.net](mailto:tbuilding@wauwatosa.net) or call (414) 479-8907 with questions or concerns. This informational guide was updated 11/2025.

### **What if my contractor did not take out a permit?**

Ultimately, it is the homeowner's responsibility to obtain all required permits for a project. If the work does not comply with code requirements, remediation may be required. Work that cannot be made to comply will require removal.

Work started on site prior to permit issuance may be subject to a double permit fee.

Work concealed prior to inspection may need destructive investigation to verify the code compliance of the work.

If work was installed without a permit, an approved permit will be needed after the installation is complete. After the permit is obtained, inspections will be needed on site.

### **How much will a building permit cost?**

The cost of the permit depends on the size and cost of the proposed project. Wauwatosa's self service online portal includes a permit cost estimator.

### **What construction projects require building permits?**

Generally, a building permit is required for new construction, additions, alterations and structural repairs of a building or structure. Electrical, mechanical and plumbing permits may also be required.

***NOTE: A project located in a floodplain requires a floodplain permit even if a building permit is not required.***

### **Examples of other projects that do require a building permit:**

- Any scope of work which involves the demolition or construction of walls.
- Any scope of work which involves removing the wall finish material more than what is required for the mechanical, electrical, or plumbing scope of work (this will need an "open wall" permit).
- Finishing previously unfinished spaces such as basements or attics.
- Foundation repair.
- Wood stoves or fireplaces.
- Above ground or in-ground pools
- Decks 2 feet above grade and/or attached to a house.
- Fence in the front yard or side yard abutting a street.
- Storage sheds over 100 square feet.
- Attached or detached garages.
- Demolition or moving any building.

### **Example of projects that normally do not require a building permit (if in doubt, please call our office)**

- Replacement of doors or windows when the rough opening is not altered.
- Replacement of roofing or siding when the architectural style of the house is not altered.
- Landscaping.
- Patching, painting, and decorating.
- Installation of cabinets, shelves and countertops.
- Storage sheds 100 square feet or less.

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**NOTE: Compliance with the City ordinance and Building Code is needed even if the scope of work does not require a permit.**

**Do I need a permit for a dumpster?**

Only if it will be located on the street or public sidewalk. If so, please call Engineering Services at (414) 479-8927.

**Safety Tip:**

***If your project involves excavation, why not give Diggers Hotline (800)242-8511 a call?***

**QUESTIONS?**

**Planning:** 414-479-8957

**Building Inspection:**

West of 92nd Street:

Mike Niedermann 414-479-8909

[mniedermann@wauwatosa.net](mailto:mniedermann@wauwatosa.net)

East of 92<sup>nd</sup> Street:

Kurt McMahon 414-479-8908

[kmcmahon@wauwatosa.net](mailto:kmcmahon@wauwatosa.net)

**Permit application questions:** 414-479-8907

**City of Wauwatosa**

**Building & Safety Division**

7725 West North Avenue

Wauwatosa, Wisconsin 53213

(414) 479-8907

Fax: (414) 479-8986

E-mail: [tbuilding@wauwatosa.net](mailto:tbuilding@wauwatosa.net)

Web Site: [www.wauwatosa.net](http://www.wauwatosa.net)

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