

ATTIC CONVERSION TO LIVING SPACE

One of the most cost-effective ways to add living space to a home is to utilize an attic. However, this space was not initially designed to meet minimum life-safety standards for living space. The following information will be required to evaluate an attic or partially finished floor in order to obtain a permit.

FLOOR PLANS

Floor plans are needed showing the area to be remodeled. Floor plan must include:

- Provide and label a floor plan showing the existing space and the proposed scope of demolition.
- Provide and label a new floor plan showing the proposed use of each space.
- Show and label any proposed structural modifications.
- Proposed head height in all of the finished spaces.
- Window location, size and headers. Remember, newly finished spaces need natural ventilation or balanced mechanical ventilation per SPS 321.05(02). This is referring to outside air. Infiltration may not be considered as make up air.
- Door locations and sizes.
- Location of smoke and carbon monoxide detectors (hard wired with battery back-up)
- Stairways (even if existing stairs will be reused)
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 - Rise – (houses built prior to 1980, tread depth 8-1/2" min, riser height 8-1/4" max; houses built after 1980 tread depth 9" min, riser height 8 inches max)
 - Headroom – (houses built prior to 1980 – 6 feet; houses built since 1980 – 6 feet 4 inches)
 - Width – (houses built prior to 1980 – 34 inches; houses built since 1980 – 36 inches)
 - Handrails – 30-38 inches above the tread nosing

CROSS-SECTION

Modifications to the existing roof structure or changes of existing attic space to finished space will require a cross section showing framing, materials, and ceiling heights:

- Ceiling height – (houses built prior to 1980 - 6 feet 8 inches minimum for 50% of the floor area, houses built since 1980; houses built since 1980 - 7 feet minimum for 50% of the floor area)
- Size of floor joists, even if the existing floor joists are proposed to be reused.
- Beams and ducts may not hang more than 8 inches below the minimum ceiling height.
- Asymmetrically loaded roof ridges (such as a shed dormer on one side of the house) have special structural considerations. Options include a ridge beam supported to the foundation or structural analysis. Reference SPS 321.27(4) and SPS 320-325 Appendix A page 106.
- Provisions shall be taken to absorb the horizontal thrust produced by a sloping roof at the top of a wall per SPS 321.02(2). Options include ceiling joists, ridge beams supported to the foundation, or wall ties with sufficient capacity verified through structural analysis.

THIRD FLOOR LEVELS

In addition to the requirements above, exiting for newly finished spaces on the third floor must meet one of the following requirements:

- Two separate staircases that lead to the 2nd floor
- One staircase that lead to the 2nd floor and the third floor space meets all of the following requirements:
 - The habitable area consists of a single, undivided room which is 400 square feet or less
 - The third floor has an egress window
 - The third floor is not used for sleeping

For more information, visit our website at www.wauwatosa.net/government/departments/building-safety. Please email the Building and Safety Division at tbuilding@wauwatosa.net or call (414) 479-8907 with questions or concerns. This informational guide was updated 11/2025.