



Permit Center

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When Do I Need a Permit?

Permits are required to construct, enlarge, alter, repair, move, or demolish a building or structure, to change the use of a building, or to erect, install, enlarge, alter, repair, remove, convert or replace any electrical, gas, mechanical or plumbing system. Permits are required to be obtained **prior** to beginning any work. In situations when replacements and repairs must be performed in an emergency situation, the permit application shall be submitted to the Permit Center on the next business day.

Work Exempt from Permits

The following is a list of common activities that are exempt from obtaining a permit from the Building Services Division. See Bellingham Municipal Code (BMC) 17.10 for a complete list. Work that does not require a permit from Building Services may require permit(s) from other departments (see also "Common Considerations" on next page). Any work, whether or not it requires a permit, must meet the intent and provisions of the Bellingham Municipal Code (BMC) and any other laws or ordinances of the City of Bellingham. Permit exemption does not authorize work in violation of these laws.

Buildings & Structures

1. **Alterations** of buildings regulated by the International Residential Code (IRC) for which the total cost of fair market value of the alteration does not exceed fifteen hundred dollars in any consecutive six month period. The permit exemption shall not otherwise exempt the alteration from the substantive standards of the code nor does it apply to electric, plumbing or mechanical devices.
2. Nonfixed and movable **cases, counters and partitions** not over 5 ft. 9 in. in height;
3. Exterior **decks**, associated platforms, ramps and steps accessory to residential buildings constructed under the provisions of the IRC which are not more than 30 inches above adjacent grade plane and not over any basement or story below.
4. **Detached accessory structures** that are one-story and used as tool and storage sheds, tree-supported play structures, playhouses and similar uses, provided the floor area does not exceed 120 square feet and the structure is located in accordance with all land use regulations.
5. **Fences** not over 8 feet (2,438 mm) high that do not have masonry or concrete elements above 6 feet. *(Please note fences and walls located within land use setbacks have height restrictions set by the land use code that require compliance even if a building permit is not required).*
6. When accessory to one-family or two-family dwellings, temporary prefabricated flexible **membrane structures** used solely for non-commercial use to shelter household items. Such structures shall have supporting elements composed entirely of factory built metal or plastic with vertical elements spaced no closer than 36" on center. Such structures shall be placed in compliance with applicable land use and storm water regulations.
7. **Painting, papering, tiling, carpeting, cabinets, counter tops and similar finish work.**
8. **Repairs.** Application or notice to the Building Official is not required for ordinary repairs to structures. 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 standpipe, 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.

9. **Retaining walls** which are not over 4 feet in height measured from the bottom of the footing to the top of the wall, unless supporting a surcharge like a parking area, structure, or another wall. *(Please note fences and walls located within land use setbacks have height restrictions set by the land use code that require compliance even if a building permit is not required).*
10. **Shade cloth structures** constructed for nursery or agricultural purposes and not including service systems.
11. **Sidewalks and driveways** at grade and not part of an accessible route.
12. Prefabricated **swimming pools** accessory to a single or two family dwelling which are less than 24 inches deep, do not exceed 5,000 gallons and are installed entirely above ground.
13. **Swings, slides and other similar playground equipment.**
14. **Water tanks** supported directly on 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.
15. **Window awnings** supported by an exterior wall of 1- and 2-family dwellings or Group R-3 and Group U occupancies which do not project more than 54 inches (1,372 mm) from the exterior wall and do not require additional support.

Mechanical

1. Portable heating, cooking, or clothes-drying appliances.
2. Portable ventilation equipment, cooling unit or evaporative cooler.
3. Steam, hot or chilled water piping within any heating or cooling equipment regulated by this code.
4. Replacement of any part which does not alter its approval or make it unsafe.
5. Self-contained refrigeration system containing 10 pounds (4.54 kg) or less of refrigerant and actuated by motors of 1 horsepower (746 W) or less.
6. Portable fuel cell appliances that are not connected to a fixed piping system and are not interconnected.

Plumbing

1. The stopping and/or repairing of leaks in drains, water, soil, waste or vent pipe; provided, however, that should any concealed trap, drain pipe, water, soil, waste or vent pipe become defective and it becomes necessary to remove and replace the same with new material, the same shall be considered as new work and a permit shall be procured and inspection made as provided in code.
2. The clearing of stoppages.
3. Reinstallation or replacement of prefabricated fixtures that do not involve or require the replacement or rearrangement of valves or pipes.

Common Considerations for Exempt Work

The following is a list of common considerations that are overlooked when doing work that does not require a permit from the Building Services Division. This list is not intended to be all inclusive of requirements; please see a Permit Technician about particular scenarios.

1. Structures are not allowed within land use setbacks or easements.
2. There are additional requirements if you are located in a critical area (ex. Steep slope, wetland, etc.) or its buffer or the Lake Whatcom watershed.
3. Addition of structures cannot cause property to exceed lot coverage limitations.
4. Structures cannot be placed on utilities unless such utilities are upgraded to meet building code.
5. Structures cannot be located on City right-of-way (ROW) without prior approval from the Public Works Department.
6. Stormwater permits are required if the project includes more than 300 square feet of new or replaced impervious surface, or more than 500 square feet of land disturbing activity.