

## **The Permit Process**

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You have made the decision to remodel your home, you have come to grips with the fact that getting a permit is the right thing to do and now it's time to tackle the permit process. Home remodeling is not something you do on a regular basis. In fact you may only do it once or twice in a lifetime. Of course you have watched all the home improvement shows. Heck, they tear down and build a new home every week on one show. Unfortunately, Hollywood only shows you the sexy parts of the process, the tearing down walls with a bulldozer, the time-lapse view of the new home rising up out of the rubble and the joy of the family returning from vacation to a brand new home. The back-story is much more mundane but just as, if not more, important.

Successful construction projects start with a solid idea of what you want to do translated into a complete set of plans. For many projects it is possible for a property owner to prepare their own plans. Other, more complex projects, will require the hiring of a designer, an architect or an engineer. In either case, it is vital that you do your homework regarding what you can and cannot do on your property. The best way determine what is allowed is to come down to the Permit Center and speak to a member of The Planning and Building staff. For a preliminary meeting it is most helpful to have some photos of the existing conditions as well as a simple site plan showing the building location in relation to your property lines. This meeting will help you clarify issues such as building setbacks, building height and building design requirements.

Once a complete set of plans has been prepared the next step is to submit them for review and approval. Application submittal requires a form to be filled out and fees to be

paid. The Permit Technicians in the Permit Center will work with you in getting your project into the system. Depending on the nature and complexity of the project, the permit may be issued over-the-counter, or it may need to be submitted and reviewed by a number of City departments. With few exceptions any changes to the exterior of your building needs to go through the design review approval process. Again depending on the nature of the proposed project this approval may be granted over-the-counter or may need to go through the more lengthy major design review process.

Design Review applies to all new buildings as well as many exterior changes to your building. A planner reviews your project in order to determine if it is exempt from Design Review. Projects determined to be subject to Design Review are reviewed for completeness and conformance with City of Alameda design guidelines. Property owners within 100 feet of your property are notified of your project and are given 10 days to comment on it. Public hearings are not required for Design Review, but hearings may be held where members of the public express interest in the application. So it is not a bad idea to let your neighbors know ahead of time what you are planning to build in order to solicit any concerns they have early in the process. Upon receiving design review exemption or approval your project can now be submitted for review to determine compliance with applicable plumbing, electrical, mechanical, building, and other City code requirements.

During the review process, whether design review, building or other review, City staff may ask for clarifications and or corrections to the submitted plans. Every effort is made to get the initial review of most applications complete within 15 working days of submittal. (5 working days for very simple plans that can not be issued over-the-counter) A shorter turnaround can be expected after re-submittal. The vast majority of applications submitted for permit approval are ready to issue in less than 3 weeks. Over 60% of submitted permit applications are issued the same day. Should your project be one of the 40% not issued over-

the-counter you will be notified as soon as your project is reviewed and approved. Permits can only be issued to the property owner or to a licensed contractor. (In a future article I will talk about choosing and working with a contractor vs. owner-builder permits.)

At this point in the process you are ready to start building. At various times during the project you will need to schedule a City Building Inspector to come out and review the progress. In next month's article I will explain more about the inspection process and what to look for.

The entire process, from first submittal through to final inspection, can be tracked online, 24/7 in both English and Spanish, at <https://aca.accela.com/alameda/>. At this site you can see where your project is in plan check, you can see what if any plan check comments there are and once the permit is issued, you can see whether or not the inspector approved the latest stage of work.

I have outlined the basics of how the process of obtaining a permit works in Alameda. Each project is different so as you embark on your project please take a look at the many handouts we have available on the City of Alameda website. And of course you can always contact us here at City Hall or by emailing me at [builingofficial@ci.alameda.ca.us](mailto:builingofficial@ci.alameda.ca.us).

Obtaining a permit is the law, and it is also a good idea. Planning & Building staff are ready to assist you as you navigate through the review process. We are located in Room 190 on the first floor of City Hall, located at 2263 Santa Clara Avenue. We can be reached by phone at 510-747-6850.