

Why Do I Need to Get a Permit?

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So you've decided to do some remodeling on your house. This is a big deal! The house will be torn up, there will be dust everywhere, and it will cost a fortune. There are so many decisions to make. Do I hire a contractor; can I do it myself; how much can I afford? These and hundreds of other equally important questions need to be answered before you can even think about starting the job.

If you have thought about permits at all, you have probably been trying to figure out if they are worth the hassle. You have heard the horror stories about the permit process. It takes forever to get projects approved; it is expensive; the inspector will nit pick my project to death. Besides, it's your house, and why can't you do what you want?

Despite the perceived hassle involved in getting City approval, the permit and inspection process is in place to assure everyone's adherence to minimum standards to safeguard life and limb and property and public welfare and to uphold the design standards of the community. The nearly universal enforcement of recognized building codes in the United States has resulted in a built environment that is among the safest in the world. One need only watch the news from around the world to see the devastation caused by moderate earthquakes in parts of the world that do not aggressively enforce building codes. In addition, ensuring that buildings are built to code helps reduce death and injury from fire and electric shock.

So, you might be asking at this point, when do I need to get a permit? You'll be happy to know that there are a variety of projects that don't require permits, including:

Building Permit Exempt Projects

1. One-story detached accessory structures used provided the floor area does not exceed 120 square feet
2. Fences not over 6 feet high
3. Retaining walls that are not over 4 feet in height
4. Painting, papering, tiling, carpeting, and similar finish work
5. Swings and other playground equipment
6. Window awnings supported by an exterior wall of Group R-3 (one and two family homes) and U (garages) occupancies
7. Non-fixed and movable fixtures, cases, racks, counters and partitions not over 5 feet 9 inches in height

Electrical Permit Exemptions:

1. Minor repair work, including the replacement of lamps or the connection of approved portable electrical equipment to approved permanently installed receptacles

Plumbing Permit Exemptions:

1. The stopping of leaks in provided that if any concealed pipe must be removed and replaced with new material, such work shall be considered as new work and a permit shall be obtained and inspection made
2. The clearing of stoppages or the repairing of leaks in pipes, valves or fixtures and removal and reinstallation of water closets (toilets), provided such repairs do not involve or require the replacement or rearrangement of valves, pipes or fixtures.

Almost else requires a permit before you begin work. In addition to permits, any change to the exterior of your building, and yes this includes windows, requires a permit and design review approval.

Not many people look forward to visiting City Hall to obtain a permit. Most people, however, are pleasantly surprised by the ease and speed of the process. A number of permit types are issued over-the-counter, including bathroom and kitchen remodels where there is no structural work.

Not only does a permit ensure the work is done correctly and to code, you will also avoid the pitfalls of failing to obtain a permit. Among the downsides of failure to obtain a permit prior to starting work are increased fees (four times the normal permit fees), the possibility the work is unsafe and hazardous, the possibility that the work does not meet code and will have to be repaired or removed, and the requirement that you disclose illegal construction when you go to sell your home.

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.