

RESTAURANTS AND FOOD SERVICE

Establishing a restaurant or food service business requires a building permit for any new construction, remodel, tenant improvement, or change of use. Approval by the [Tacoma-Pierce County Health Department](#) is also required prior to the City issuing your building permit. Building permit applications cannot be approved over-the-counter and often take several weeks to review. We recommend hiring a designer/architect who can prepare your permit plans.

You can use the [Restaurant Location Selection Worksheet](#) and this tip sheet to help guide your permitting path for opening a restaurant or food service business.

Land Use and Zoning

Do not sign a lease before knowing if your preferred location is suitable for your type of operation.

The Planning and Development Services Department (PDS) offers free land use guidance. [Contact us](#) for more information or come to the Permit Counter during walk-in hours.

Some locations in the City have land use and zoning restrictions that do not allow restaurants or a particular type of restaurant. Most establishments are categorized as "Restaurant" or "Drinking Establishment," while some may involve food or drink production. *If your location is near the waterfront or in a historic district or building, you may need a land use approval before the City can issue a building permit.*

Building Code Group Occupancy

The building code considers how many people can safely be in the building based on seating layout, size of the space, and use of each space (seating area, kitchen, storage, etc.).

You or your designer/architect will need to provide an occupancy calculation based on your floor plan.



Before you sign a lease, check the existing certificate of occupancy for the building to see how many people are allowed and for what type of business. Is the occupancy appropriate for your restaurant?

If not, you'll be proposing a *change of occupancy*. This triggers review of the building for potential upgrades that could include energy code, accessibility, restrooms, exiting, firewalls, etc., and off-site improvements (sidewalk, curb, gutter, curb ramps, driveway/alley approach, street conditions).

We recommend your occupancy calculation be confirmed by a building engineer prior to submitting your permit application. See the [Tenant Improvements](#) tip sheet for more information.



Substantial Renovation or Construction

Additional development standards may be triggered if your project is considered a Substantial Renovation or Construction, defined as: *Remodeling, alteration, or reconstruction of, and/or addition to, an existing building within a two-year period, the cost of which exceeds 50 percent of the value of the building as calculated using the latest Building Valuation Data published by the International Code Council. The two-year period is measured from the issuance date of the initial building permit for the project.*

Accessibility



Providing an accessible route of travel from the accessible parking stall(s) into the building requires paved pathways of 2% slope or less,



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doorways 32 inches to 48 inches wide, and clear 36 inch-wide pathways inside the building. If customers are to order from a counter, a minimum 36-inch portion of the counter that is no higher than 36 inches is also required. Restrooms may also need to be accessible. *Historic buildings may have different requirements. Please schedule a Commercial Building Code Coaching meeting.*

Fire Suppression and Safety

The occupancy also determines how many exits you will need from the space, and whether a fire sprinkler system or fire alarm system are required. If your restaurant requires a new fire sprinkler system it could be a substantial additional cost. Important thresholds:

- Occupancy of 50+ requires two exits from the space
- Occupancy of 100+ requires a fire sprinkler system
- Occupancy of 300+ requires a fire alarm system

Kitchen Exhaust Hoods



The type of kitchen hood that is appropriate for your grill or equipment depends on the type of exhaust generated. You will need a Type I or a Type II hood, and it will need to be output to the exterior of the building. Your mechanical contractor will be in charge of obtaining permits for your hood. A separate Hood Fire Protection permit may be required for certain hood types.

Mechanical, Plumbing, and Electric

Ventilation systems, mechanical units, refrigeration units, and coolers all require mechanical permits. If you are proposing any openings through the roof or wall,

ventilation cannot be output onto neighboring property lines.

The number of restrooms, sinks, or drinking fountains (plumbing fixtures) will be reviewed for your restaurant based on the building group occupancy.

Existing sanitary sewers would need to be tested to show they are in good condition. If not in good condition, a replacement connection would be required. All new sanitary connections for commercial uses are required to be at least 6" diameter. Electrical permitting is done through Tacoma Power. Energy code compliance is reviewed with your building permit, forms are available through the [SBCC](#).

Grease Treatment

As part of the restaurant plan review, the City will require a grease removal device. When researching locations, check to see what devices are already in place, and if none, where installation is feasible. The type and size of grease protection device depends on your menu and number of patrons. Dumpster pads where kitchen cookware or appliances are cleaned, kept, or left to dry will also need a sanitary drain with grease protection. See our [Grease Interceptor Sizing and Installation](#) tip sheet as well as the [City's Grease Interceptor Policy](#) for more information about Grease Interceptors.

Parking

If you change the use of a location or increase the floor area, you might need to meet additional parking. Parking exemptions and reductions may be available and can be explained by a Land Use Planner. Also, see our [Parking Lot Changes](#) tip sheet for more information.

Serving Alcohol

If you are planning to produce, serve, or sell alcohol, make sure you know which use classification in the zoning code fits your business and that you have the appropriate permits and licenses. For example, a "drinking establishment" (taverns, bars, pubs, or cocktail lounges, etc.) generally has an age restriction and is only allowed in certain zoning districts with a [conditional use permit](#). This is different from a "restaurant" that primarily serves food but may offer alcohol (cafés, eateries, bistros, diners, restaurants, sandwich shops, etc.). Producing alcohol also



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means your use would be associated with “craft production” as a [brewery](#), winery, brewpub, or [distillery](#).

Serving alcohol requires a liquor license – 60-90 days for approval, and both the location and applicant must meet the criteria for obtaining a liquor license. A liquor license is required from the Washington State Liquor and Cannabis Board for any alcohol production, sale, or service. More information is available at <https://lcb.wa.gov/licensing/apply-liquor-license>.

Sidewalk Cafes & Outdoor Seating



A street occupancy permit or sidewalk permit will allow you to have outdoor seating in the right-of-way. However, sidewalk cafes must meet specific requirements. See our [Right-of-Way Occupancy](#) and [Sidewalk Café](#) Tip Sheets for additional information.

Noise and Smoke

In general, commercial music should not be plainly audible from a distance of 100 feet or more from the property line of the business. Enforcement of the noise ordinance is complaint-based. See the [noise enforcement code](#) for more information. Additionally, consider placement of output ventilation that could create smoke (i.e., hood vents) so that they do not direct onto neighboring properties. Approval from the [Puget Sound Clean Air Agency](#) is required for wood-fired ovens and coffee roasters.

Signs and Awnings

Weather protection over pedestrian areas will likely be required for new construction, substantial renovation, or modifications to existing awnings. Plans can be

reviewed as part of your overall building permit, or as part of your sign permit. See the [Sign Permit Tip Sheet](#) for more information about Sign permitting requirements.

Adequate Utility Services

Are the electric, water, dumpster, sewer, and gas capacities sufficient at your location – especially if you are adding new equipment or sprinklers?

Check with utility providers for guidance:

- Tacoma Public Utilities
 - Power and Water www.mytpu.org
- Puget Sound Energy
 - Natural Gas www.pse.com
- Environmental Services
 - Sanitary Sewer (253) 591-5588

Off-Site (Frontage) Improvements

Off-site improvements, or “frontage” improvements, include sidewalk, curb, gutter, ADA accessible ramps, driveways, and alley approaches next to the property.

All projects require existing off-site improvements that are in disrepair or damaged to be repaired to current City Public Works standards. For example, replacement of a portion of sidewalk that is cracked and not safe for pedestrians may be required.

For existing improvements, a site inspector may use the following guidelines in the field to determine what pedestrian access features would need to be removed, replaced, or repaired:

- A height differential or separation greater than 1/8 inch on the sidewalk
- Cracks, hairline fractures, separation or hole in the sidewalk greater than 1 inch in width
- Intersecting cracks that divide a sidewalk panel resulting in missing or depressed sidewalk
- Driveway or alley approach or access ramp with cross-slope greater than 2%.

Remember projects that meet the criteria of substantial renovations and construction require additional off-site improvements. Tacoma Municipal Code (TMC) Title 2.1



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