



# NAVIGATING THE PERMIT PROCESS

*Boston Inspectional Services*

*This guide gives an overview and describes the overall building permitting and inspection process in the City of Boston. For specific questions, please contact Inspectional Services at [617-635-5300](tel:617-635-5300) or [isd@boston.gov](mailto:isd@boston.gov), or call 311.*

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# 1. GETTING STARTED

## STEP 1: LEARN THE PROCESS & CONTEXT

- **Who is responsible for building permits?** [Inspectional Services](#) administers and enforces building, housing, health, sanitation, and safety regulations mandated by City and State governments. Permits for construction projects include building, electrical, plumbing, and gas must be applied for before doing work. Depending on the scope, scale, and location of your project, review from other agencies may be required.
- **Are you building or renovating a small business?** The [Office of Economic Opportunity and Inclusion Cabinet](#) offers one-stop resources for all businesses in the City of Boston, including the Small Business Development Team and Boston Main Streets, both of which offer resources to start, grow, and build businesses in Boston.
- **Are you building or renovating your home?** The [Mayor's Office of Housing and Environment](#) Departments, as well as the [Boston Planning & Development Agency](#), offer resources for homeowners and renters to learn more about the spatial and environmental conditions of construction in Boston.

## STEP 2: CHECK THE PROPERTY'S ZONING & OCCUPANCY STATUS

- **I'm planning to build in Boston. Where do I start?** Before you apply for permits to start any type of construction, and you have not already done so, you will want to consult a licensed design professional (Architect or Engineer) from the state of Massachusetts and a licensed contractor who can help draft the appropriate documents and guide you through the entire process. You may want to confirm the location's permit history, zoning designation, and legal occupancy status.

### DESIGN & CONSTRUCTION NEEDS

- **Licensed Contractor** — When considering who you need to hire for your project, we recommend that you only use a licensed contractor (CSL) with a HIC (Home Improvement Contracting), and that this designated person apply for all permits on your behalf.

- You can check a Licensed Builder's License through the [state's site](#).
- For more information on finding a contractor, drafting an agreement, and what to know before and during construction, visit the [Home Improvement & Contracting Tips](#) page.



- **Designing the Space** – The permit process for long forms will require that you submit your building plans to ISD for review and approval. We recommend that you research and make a plan for hiring an architect or designer who can produce technical drawings on your behalf. In many cases where there are no changes to the existing use, egress, or other critical parameters, plans may not be required. For simple home repairs, most do not require such plans.

## REVIEWING LEGAL DOCUMENTATION

- **Permit History** – Before getting started, check the building's existing legal use and occupancy and past permits online through the [Building Permit Search](#). The ISD Document Room at 1010 Massachusetts Ave. can offer additional assistance.
- **Zoning Designation** – You can also check zoning online by searching for parcel designation on the [Boston Planning & Development Agency's searchable map](#). Depending on the type of work you intend to do, your project will fall into one of two zoning categories:
  - **As-Of-Right** – If your property is zoned for your intended use and conforms with all the other zoning requirements, you may proceed with the application process.
  - **Zoning Relief** – If your proposed work does not conform with all the current zoning requirements, then, your permit application will be refused, and you will need to seek variances from the [Zoning Board of Appeal](#) (ZBA) and be subject to a neighborhood review process.
  - **Status Updates** - You will be able to track your zoning relief appeal on the [ZBA Tracker](#).
- **Proof of Legal Occupancy** – The Inspectional Services site tells you [how to get the necessary proof](#) whether your record already exists or not. Confirm there is a legal record of use and occupancy for the property prior to applying for your permit.
  - **Record on File** – You can request a copy of the record of occupancy from ISD before pursuing a short or long form permit, depending on the type of construction (this process is outlined below).



- **No Record on File** – You will need to apply to confirm occupancy. Depending on the scope of work you can either add the work description to this application or wait for the application to issue and then apply for and obtain a minor permit for the proposed work.



### STEP 3: DETERMINE YOUR PERMIT REQUIREMENTS

#### SPECIFIC BUILDING PERMITS

- **Why do I need a building permit?** Permits are required to begin any type of construction under the law. As mentioned, the Inspectional Services permit process is based on whether you're making changes to a structure or to a building's occupancy.
- **Who needs to apply for building permits?** Any individual contractor, company or homeowner looking to do a construction project needs to apply for a building permit.
- **Which building permit do I need?** If you've already determined the occupancy and zoning conditions of your property, you might have already considered whether a short-form or long-form permit is required.
  - **Short-Form/Minor Permit** – These are required for minor work and jobs that do not change a building's: a) Use or exits, b) Fire protection, c) Or living area.
  - **Long-Form/Alteration Permit** – These are required for new construction, or to make major updates to an existing building that might require zoning relief. Major examples include:
    - *New construction and additions,*
    - *Structural repairs or renovations,*
    - *Changes to or legalization of the use or occupancy, if there's no record,*
    - *Creating an [Additional Dwelling Unit \(ADU\)](#),*
    - *Installing a fire suppression system or fire alarms,*
    - *And increasing the capacity of use within the building.*
  - For more information on different building permits, visit the ISD [What Building Permit Do I Need?](#) page.



## OTHER RELEVANT PERMITS

- **Will I need [other permits](#) during construction?** Yes, it is likely that your project will require other permit applications. For both residential and commercial projects, ISD includes “how-to” guides for the following permit types:
  - [Demolition permits](#)
  - [Use of premises permits](#)
  - [Foundation permits](#)
  - [New construction permits](#)
  - [Flammable storage garage license](#) - Required if a project has an indoor garage included
  - [Sheet metal](#) (ductwork)
  - [Electrical and Mechanical Permits](#)
- **Department(s) Review** — Depending on the scope of your project, the approval process may include requirements from the Environment, Landmarks, Water & Sewer, [Public Improvement Commission](#), and Fire Departments.



City of Boston  
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## 2. MOVING FORWARD

### STEP 4: GATHER THE CORRECT INFORMATION

- **What is required for applying for a building permit?** For both short-form and long-form permits, applicants must be prepared to provide the following information or documents:
  - Full Description of Work
  - Estimated Total Cost
  - Identification and Trade Licenses
  - A Copy of Contractor Agreement
  - Homeowner Waiver
  - Mattocks Higgins Affidavit
  - Workers Compensation Affidavit
  - Other Possible Information
    - The rodent control number for basement and groundwork
    - Construction documents, including plans (if long form)
    - A health certificate for commercial food preparation
    - Construction Safety Affidavit (depending on project size and permit type)
  - Landmark Commission Approval (if working in historic district)
- **ISD's Overall Checklist** - This [Building Permit Application Checklist](#) covers each of these categories in greater depth depending on the level of demolition and new construction.
- **Search Approved Permits** - The [Analyze Boston](#) site also includes a way to search past and recently issued permits, all of which are public record, and should cover the best practices of filling in this information.

### STEP 5: SUBMIT YOUR PERMIT APPLICATION

#### WHERE TO APPLY

- **Where do I apply for building permits?** Most building permit types can be completed online through the [ISD Permit & Licenses Portal](#). Be prepared to create and remember your login information so that you can save your ongoing work while gathering the necessary information.

## HOW TO APPLY

- **How do I apply for building permits?** We encourage all permit-seekers to first apply through the online portal. If you run into an issue that requires in-person assistance, the ISD office at 1010 Massachusetts Avenue can assist you Monday-Friday, from 8AM TO 4PM.
- **Overall Process** — The online application process will require you to complete the following steps:
  - Register for an account (username & password)
  - Choose your permit type, location, and role (three steps)
  - Add team contact information
  - Choose work type, occupancy type, valuation of work to be performed, description of job
  - Upload documents
  - Pay relevant fees
- **How-To Guides** — Many people have come to us with specific questions on how to apply for permits or upload their documents. In response, we've created a few visual resources to guide you through the process:
  - [Web Page: How to Get a Short-Form Permit](#)
  - [Web Page: How to Get a Long-Form Permit](#)
  - [Video: How to Apply for Short-Form Permits](#)
- **Payment** — The cost of each permit can be found [here](#). You can pay online with debit, credit card or PayPal online.



## 3. FOLLOWING UP

### STEP 6: UNDERSTAND THE REVIEW TIMELINE

- **What does it take for a permit to be approved?** If all documents are accounted for and uploaded correctly, your permit will be reviewed in several stages:
  - Intake & payment
  - Project review
  - Zoning review (if necessary)
  - Issuance
  - Inspection
  - Occupancy
  - Completion
  - Building Review
  - Fire Prevention Code Review
- **How long will it take for my permit to be reviewed?**
  - **Short-Form** – May take 1 week with all the correct documents.
  - **Long-Form** – It can depend on the size of the project, between 4 to 5 weeks with all the required documents submitted and if the application does not need building or zoning relief.

### STEP 7: APPEALING YOUR APPLICATION

- **What should I do if my permit has been denied?** If ISD issues a refusal letter to your permit application, it is likely you can redesign your project or seek variances/relief from the zoning board. Here's a step-by-step description of what to do:
  - **Submit Appeal** – After getting an ISD refusal letter, you must [submit your appeal](#) within 45 days of the refusal letter date.
  - **Community Review** – Once your appeal is submitted, you will need to reach out to the [Mayor's Office of Neighborhood Services \(ONS\)](#) to begin your community review process. This may include an abutters meeting coordinated by the ONS Neighborhood Liaison that represents the neighborhood in which your project is proposed, and

often attending a meeting with the local civic or neighborhood association.

- **Zoning Board of Appeal** — After your community process is completed, ONS will notify ISD that your appeal is ready to be scheduled for a hearing before the [Zoning Board of Appeal](#) (ZBA), which meets every other week. Due to case volume and legal notice requirements, it can take up to several weeks before your appeal will be heard. The [ZBA Tracker](#) and [ZBA Appeal Process](#) guides are also helpful resources.
- **Legal Decision** — After your hearing, a legal decision is drafted and submitted to the Commissioner for signature. Once signed, there is a required 20 day appeal period that must be exhausted before the appeal decision is finalized and plans are returned to the ISD Plans Examiner for final review.
- Plans Examiner will notify you in writing if more documents are needed to finalize the review process.

## STEP 8: DETERMINING NEXT STEPS

- **What should I do after my permit has been issued?** Congratulations! Before starting work on your project, you need to get a printed Building Permit card. If you applied for a permit online, this is something you can print at home on your own.
- **When can I use my home or open my business?** Securing relevant permits is a major step in the construction process, but will need to be followed up by requesting building inspections at different phases of the construction. ISD will conduct inspections during the life of your project. Reports from those inspections are required to close out the permit. Additionally, the Boston Fire Department, if having jurisdiction, may need to approve pending the success of life-safety devices installed and tested. [Contact the Inspector](#) to get started. You may be required to obtain a certificate of occupancy.
- **How long does my permit last?** Once you get your permit, work must commence within six months of the issuance date and continue without interruption. In some cases, you may be able to extend your permit for longer periods with ISD approval..

## STEP 9: CONSULT ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- **What other resources are available?** Depending on the nature of your project, ISD recommends consulting other programs and guides that might be relevant to your property and project.
  - **Additional Dwelling Unit (ADU) Program** — The ADU program allows owner occupants in the City of Boston to carve out space within the existing footprint of their homes to create independent units, known as Additional Dwelling Units (ADUs) with no zoning review. For more information on this pilot program, please consult [their website](#).
  - **Restaurant Opening Guide** — Working with the Office of Economic Development, ISD put together a [Opening Guide for Food Service Establishments](#) ([available in multiple languages](#)) that provides an overview and describes the restaurant-specific permitting and inspection process in the City of Boston.
  - **Zoning 101 Guide** - Watch the [Zoning 101 Workshop](#) hosted by ISD earlier in 2021 and view the [Zoning Board of Appeal Guide](#) for an explanation of how a project moves through the zoning process and answers some frequently asked questions about the zoning process.
  - Note: In a [flood designated area](#), no residential living unit can be allowed below the flood elevation (BFE) indicated on the map unless approved by Authority Having Jurisdiction (AHJ).