



Restaurants and Food Service

G-105

City of Tacoma • 747 Market Street, Room 345, Tacoma, WA 98402

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.

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

Land Use and Zoning

Some locations in the City have land use and zoning restrictions that don't 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. *Don't 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 during walk-in hours, or by phone, email, or scheduled appointment. You can request a free coaching meeting online at TacomaPermits.org. If your preferred location allows your type of restaurant, we recommend hiring a designer/architect who can prepare your permit plans.

Occupancy

The building code considers how many people can safely be in the restaurant based on seating layout, size of the space, and use of each space within the building (seating area, kitchen, storage, etc.). You or your designer 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*, which triggers review of the building for potential upgrades that could include energy, 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.

Fire Suppression and Safety

The occupancy also determines how many exits you'll need from the space, and whether a fire sprinkler system or fire alarm system are required. If your restaurant requires a fire sprinkler system and there is currently not one existing in the building, it could be a substantial additional cost to install a new fire main connection. See a few important thresholds below

- 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

G-105, 1/2015

Substantial Alterations

The International Existing Building Code categorizes proposed work to an existing building into different levels of alteration:

Level 1 alterations include the removal and replacement or the covering of existing materials, elements, equipment, or fixtures using new materials, elements, equipment, or fixtures that serve the same purpose.

Level 2 alterations include the reconfiguration of space, the addition or elimination of any door or window, the reconfiguration or extension of any system, or the installation of any additional equipment.

Level 3 alterations apply where the *work area* exceeds 50 percent of the aggregate area of the building.

A Level 3 alteration is also called a “substantial” alteration, which triggers review of the building for potential upgrades that could include energy, accessibility, restrooms, exiting, firewalls, etc., and off-site improvements (sidewalk, curb, gutter, curb ramps, driveway/alley approach, street conditions)

Accessibility

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

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 (fixtures) will be reviewed for your restaurant. In most cases, sanitary sewers need to be at least 6” diameter. See the [Side Sewer Permit Tip Sheet](#) for more information. All electrical permitting is done through [Tacoma Power](#), however, you’ll need to submit energy code forms with your building permit, available [here](#).

Parking

If you change the use of a location (like from retail to a restaurant) or increase the floor area, you might need additional parking depending on your zoning district. Parking exemptions and reductions may be available and can be explained by a land use planner in PDS. Also, see our [Parking Lot Changes Tip Sheet](#) for more information.

Outdoor Seating

A street occupancy permit or sidewalk permit will allow you to have outdoor seating in the right-of-way if you have a minimum 5-foot wide pedestrian access path that does not include obstacles such as light poles, bicycle racks, and street benches must remain available on the public sidewalk.

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

Be sure you have a liquor license from the Washington State Liquor Control Board for any alcohol production, sale, or service. More information is available at <http://www.liq.wa.gov/licensing/apply-liquor-license>.

Kitchen Exhaust Hoods

The type of kitchen hood that is appropriate for your grill or equipment depends on the type of exhaust that will be generated. You'll 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 and making sure it meets the appropriate clearances from property lines and adjacent buildings.

Grease Treatment

As part of the restaurant plan review, the City will require a grease removal device. When looking at locations, check to see what devices are already in place, and if none, whether 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 the [Grease Interceptor Tip Sheet](#) for more 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

If you are constructing a major remodel or are modifying an existing awning, weather protection over pedestrian areas will likely be required. Plans can be reviewed as part of your overall building permit, or when you apply for your sign permit. You do not need a sign permit for a few types of signs, such as window signs, but size limitations apply. See the [Sign Permit Tip Sheet](#) for more information.

Adequate Utility Services

Are the electric, water, dumpster, sewer, and gas capacities sufficient at your location – especially if you're adding new equipment or sprinklers? Check with utility providers for guidance or [request a meeting](#) to discuss with subject matter experts for [power](#), [water](#), [gas](#), and [sanitary sewer](#).

Off-Site Improvements

Off-site improvements (sidewalk, curb, gutter, curb ramps, driveway/alley approach, or street/alley right-of-way) are required for new buildings; alterations of more than 50% of the building floor area; or when repairs/replacements are needed to any existing off-site improvements. The site inspector typically uses 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 into multiple parts (resulting in missing or depressed sidewalk)
- Driveway or alley approach or access ramp with cross-slope greater than 2%

For more information, contact City of Tacoma Planning and Development Services.

<http://www.tacomapermits.org>, (253) 591-5030

G-105, 1/2015