



Certificate of Occupancy 2006 International Building Code (IBC)

Permit Center
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Congratulations on your progress toward opening your business in Bellingham!

The Permit Center

is here to help make sure that every business location conforms to the building codes that the City has adopted in efforts to better the safety, energy efficiency and accessibility of the community's buildings for all occupants. We are here to provide customer service related to code information and the occupancy process.

To comply with the City adopted building codes the Permit Center must ensure that each building has a **Certificate of Occupancy** specific to the type of business or activity that will occur in a defined space (not a business name) prior to any occupancy of the space – whether alterations are taking place to move in or not.

What is a Certificate of Occupancy?

A Certificate of Occupancy (C of O) grants a use approval for a space as a result of a thorough review of compliance with all building, fire, and zoning codes by the City of Bellingham (and sometimes outside agencies like Whatcom County Health Department). The physical C of O provides basic information about the building and use and should be displayed in the building at all times. The building code differentiates types of use such as retail stores, assembly occupancies (like a church or banquet hall), and warehouses. There are different requirements for each type of use – for example a restaurant may be required to have more restrooms than a warehouse of the same size, or a school may be required to install a fire sprinkler system when an office of the same size may not. A C of O review ensures all these requirements are met. Receiving a C of O provides a tenant and building owner the security of knowing they are safely and legally occupying the building or tenant space and can easily provide proof of this to insurance companies, lenders, future business owners and anyone else who may need it.

When do I need a Certificate of Occupancy?

If you are moving into a building or space and...

1. ...there have been no previous tenants.
2. ...we do not have record of a previous tenant having a C of O.
3. ...the previous tenant was a different type of business as defined by the building code.
4. ...you intend to change the size of a space that previously had a C of O.



- If you meet a condition above and are **not making any alterations** to the space that would require a permit (see reverse for definition) you will need to have an occupancy review.
- If you meet one of the conditions above and you are **making alterations that would require a permit** you will be required to obtain the necessary permits (building, plumbing, mechanical, etc.) and an occupancy review will be done with these permits. Please see the [Tenant Improvement Submittal Checklist](#) for submittal requirements and the [Building Permit Fees](#) worksheet for fees. *The rest of this document applies only to occupancy review when there is no proposed work that requires a permit.*

Exception:

You do not need to go through occupancy review if you are moving into a space and a tenant before you had a Certificate of Occupancy for the same type of business. If you think you meet this exception, contact the Permit Center for verification. (Please note you will still be required to get appropriate permits if you are making alterations to the space.)

How do I know if the work I am doing requires a permit?



Any construction, installation, or demolition of any building, mechanical, electrical, or plumbing systems with the exception of finish work such as painting and floor coverings requires a permit. The removal or addition of non-structural walls is considered an activity that requires a permit. While countertops and cabinets are not typically considered construction, these items need to be shown on your floor plan to ensure compliance with code requirements regarding accessibility for the disabled and exit routes and access. A more complete handout on when a permit is required can be found [online](#) or in the Permit Center.

What do I need to submit to be reviewed for occupancy?

A review for occupancy when no work is being proposed to the space requires you to submit enough information about the business and the building for the City to make sure that your proposal to use the space in such a way complies with all of the current codes. This includes a site plan, a key plan, and a floor plan of the space you intend to occupy. The floor plan should include labels of what each room or space will be used for. Examples of these drawings can be found in the Permit Center. Formatting and design standards for the drawings can be found [online](#) or in the Permit Center. Also, a detailed description of your business should be included.

One thing to note about an occupancy review in which you are intending to do no work is that upgrades to the space may be required as outlined in the building codes. Most commonly, new businesses need to upgrade spaces (for example restrooms) and hardware (for example door handles) to meet accessibility requirements. Two reasons upgrades may be required are that the building code outlines different requirements for different types of uses and codes change over time, so requirements today are likely more restrictive than they were when the building was built. A new business changing the use of a space is one opportunity for a building to be upgraded to comply with current requirements that increase the safety and accessibility of buildings for occupants.

What else should I know before I submit an application?

- Accessibility of the space: Accessibility of all new, enlarged or remodeled commercial and multifamily buildings must be addressed. Accessible restrooms, sales/service counters, ramps, dressing rooms and entrances may be required.
- Health Department Review: Any new tenant proposing to prepare or cook food must also receive approval from the Whatcom County Health Department. This review can be done concurrently, but a building permit cannot be issued until the Health Department has approved your plans.
- Addressing: The Permit Center assigns addresses to buildings and suites. We coordinate with the Fire Department, Police Department, and other agencies to ensure that addresses are consistent for life-safety reasons. An 11" x 17" plan showing all existing addresses and suite numbers needs to be provided so the Permit Center can confirm addressing.

What is the process and how long does it take?

1. **Occupancy Review Submittal:** Submit a complete [Building Permit Application form](#) in the Permit Center along with three copies of your site plan, key plan, and floor plans. In the Project Description box of the application, it should read: "To establish (office/retail/warehouse/etc) occupancy in existing (office/retail/warehouse/shell/etc) space; no work required." Include the name and a description of the previous tenant's business if

applicable and the name and detailed description of your proposed business on additional sheets if necessary.

2. **City Plan Review:** The City routes the plans to various departments including Building Services, Planning, Public Works, Stormwater, Fire and others as necessary. Occupancy review is typically considered a Quick Response Permit, which is a **7 business day review**. If corrections are required, you will be sent a consolidated letter from all departments and additional reviews will follow this same timeline. Your review may fall into a longer review timeframe if your proposal is complex or involves outside agencies to review – including restaurants to be reviewed by Whatcom County Health Department or proposals involving multiple tenant spaces. These cases will fall into the Standard Permit category, which has a **20 business day review**. If corrections are required, you will be sent a consolidated letter from all departments and additional reviews will follow this same timeline.
3. **Inspections:** After the occupancy review is complete, you will receive a building permit, which is our mechanism for record keeping and inspections. Once you receive your permit, work to prepare the space commences (if applicable) on the applicant's schedule while obtaining the required inspections listed on the permit. Inspections must be scheduled at least 24 hours in advance. To prevent expiration, the permit must be pursued in good faith and an inspection must be completed once every 180 days.
4. **Final Occupancy Approvals:** Coordinate with the Permit Center to receive each department's final occupancy approval. This may require additional department specific inspections after your building permit final inspection. Upon receiving all approvals, the Permit Center will print your Certificate of Occupancy.

How much does it cost?

An occupancy review for a business that requires no alterations (either proposed or as determined by the Building Department during plan review) has the following fees*:

Plan Review Fees: For occupancy review (without work proposed), the Plan Review fee is based on one hour of plan review and is due at the time of submittal . Additional plan review fees may be charged if corrections are required, at a rate of \$107/hr with a minimum ½ hr charge.	\$107
Inspection Fee: Based on one hour of inspection time. Additional inspection fees may be charged if multiple inspections are required, at a rate of \$107/hr with a minimum ½ hr charge.	\$107
State Building Code Fee: A fee which is required to be collected by cities and counties on all building permits pursuant to chapter 19.27 RCW.	\$4.50
Transportation Impact Fees (TIFs): Levied on tenant spaces that generate vehicular traffic loads and provide a means for equitably accounting for and paying for mitigation of the impacts of developments that require improvement to accommodate growth. Based on type of use and square footage. You may be credited for a previous use if they paid a TIF. For a TIF estimate, please contact Chris Comeau at 778-7900.	Varies

*A specific type of fee called a Permit Fee is not charged on projects that are not doing any work that would require a permit. If it is determined during occupancy plan review that modifications to the space must be made to comply with Code, a Permit Fee will be charged (based on valuation of work) and Plan Review Fees will be 65% of Permit Fee rather than the hourly amount stated above.