



Certificate of Occupancy

*Congratulations on your progress
toward opening your business in Bellingham!*

The building code states that each building shall have a **Certificate of Occupancy** specific to the *type of business or activity* occurring in the space. The Certificate of Occupancy must be issued prior to the new business occupying the space, regardless of whether or not a building permit is required.

Frequently Asked Questions:

What is the purpose of a Certificate of Occupancy?

The purpose of a Certificate of Occupancy (C.O.) is to show that the use of the space substantially complies with applicable regulations. There are often different requirements for each type of business or use. For example, a restaurant may require more restrooms than a warehouse of similar size, or a school may be required to install a fire sprinkler system when an office may not. A C.O. provides the tenant and building owner the security of knowing they are safely and legally occupying the building or tenant space and they can easily provide proof of this to insurance companies, lenders, and future business owners. The C.O. must be prominently displayed in the building at all times.

When do I need a Certificate of Occupancy?

A C.O. is required in all non-residential spaces. If no work is being proposed and no C.O. is posted in the business, a C.O. must be obtained before the business is opened.

If your new business complies with the codes that have historically regulated your proposed location and assuming no construction work is proposed, there would be no requirement to obtain permits from the City of Bellingham.

Should your new business be significantly different than the historic uses of the building, or if you are proposing construction work, there will be one or more permit approvals needed before commencing work or opening your business. See the separate [Tenant Improvement Checklist](#) handout for more information on building permit requirements.

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

If you are proposing construction work on your new location, please consult a qualified architect, engineer or general contractor for permit requirements. Specific questions about whether permits are required may be directed to a Permit Technician at 360-778-8300 or permits@cob.org. In general, the following thresholds apply:

PERMITS REQUIRED FOR: Any construction, installation, or demolition of any building, mechanical, electrical, or plumbing systems, including such work as: removal or addition of non-structural walls, fixture change outs, and installation of movable cases, counters and partitions exceeding 5'9" in height.

PERMITS NOT TYPICALLY REQUIRED FOR: Finish work, such as painting, papering, tiling and carpeting. Cabinets and fixed countertops do not usually require permits (however, please include the location and height of these items on your floor plan to ensure compliance with code requirements).

Any new tenant proposing to prepare or cook food must also receive approval from the Whatcom County Health Department (WCHD). It is recommended you contact WCHD as early as possible, because their requirements may affect your application to the City.

I'm not doing any work to the space and don't need a building permit. What do I need to provide for an occupancy review?

- [Application](#) form
- Site Plan. Label streets, property lines, a north arrow and building location.
- Key Plan. If in a multi-tenant building. Show your tenant location within the building, label each tenant's business type, address and suite number.
- Floor Plan. Label what each room or space will be used for and include location of all exits and indicate direction of all door swings.
- A detailed, written description of your business. Operating hours, numbers of employees and typical number of customers should be included.
- Building information. Construction type of the building, if there is a fire sprinkler or alarm. Size of tenant space and total building.
- Fees (as applicable)
- Plans shall be submitted in one complete PDF file, supplemental documents shall be submitted in PDF format and saved as individually-named PDF files separate from the drawing files.

NOTE: A Certificate of Occupancy review may trigger additional requirements to bring the building into compliance with codes for the specific use.

What is the process for an occupancy review and how long does it take?

1. **Submittal:** Submit the above mentioned information via email, a CD, flash drive or an FTP website. Please see the [Electronic Submittal Requirements](#) handout for more information.
2. **City Reviews Plans:** The City occupancy review is typically a 7 calendar day review.
3. **Inspections:** After the occupancy review is complete, an occupancy permit will be issued. You can begin preparing the space and scheduling any required occupancy inspections listed on the permit. Inspections must be scheduled at least 24 hours in advance. Upon receiving all approvals, the Permit Center will issue the Certificate of Occupancy.