



Permit Center

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Accessory Dwelling Units

Bellingham Municipal Code (BMC) Section 20.10.035

This handout is a guide for ADUs in single family zoning.
For additional infill opportunities (such as detached ADUs and carriage houses)
in other zoning areas, please contact the Permit Center.

PLANNING DIVISION

What is an Accessory Dwelling Unit (ADU)?

An ADU is a second, subordinate dwelling unit for use as a complete, independent residence with provisions for living, eating, cooking and sanitation.

- Applicants may request, and the Director may approve, minor modifications to the development and design standards for ADUs if the criteria in BMC 20.10.036(B)(3) are met.

General Restrictions & Requirements:

- The intent of the ordinance is to allow ADUs while protecting the single family character of our neighborhoods. Accordingly, whether attached or detached, and ADU must have similar roof pitch, siding and windows so that the ADU is architecturally compatible with the existing home.
- Either the primary unit or the ADU must be owner-occupied. An affidavit attesting to owner occupancy is required January 1st of every odd numbered year.
- The ADU must not exceed 66% of the gross square footage of the primary residence (excluding any garage area attached to the primary residence), or 800 square feet, whichever is more restrictive.
- Special requirements for Detached ADUs:
 - Max Height: 20' under height definition #1
 - Min. Setbacks: 5' from side and rear yards, except 0' on an alley.
- No more than two bedrooms may be located within the ADU.
- One additional parking space must be provided on site for the ADU, unless an application for a parking waiver is approved by the Director.
- A maximum of four (4) persons may occupy the ADU.
- Addresses will be assigned by the Fire Dept.

Where can an ADU be located?

Anywhere a single family residence is allowed, except within the Lake Whatcom watershed (unless allowed per BMC 16.80.060(A)).

Note: This ADU Ordinance shall be reviewed by City Council, whichever comes first: 1) By December 31, 2025, or 2) When the city issued 200 detached ADU (D-ADU) permits citywide, or 3) When the city issued 25 D-ADU permits in any one neighborhood as defined in BMC 20.00 Zoning Tables.

The unit count trigger only applies to new D-ADUs approved following adoption of Ordinance #2018-05-009. The unit count trigger does not apply to D-ADUs in areas annexed into the city after 1995 with a "mixed" use qualifier that allows multifamily residential.

What is the permitting process for an ADU?

The applicant must submit an ADU permit application along with a list of all owners of property within 500 feet, and an application fee (see fee schedule).

Planning staff sends notice of the ADU application to all property owners within 500' & applicable neighborhood representatives.

A decision will be made based on the information contained in the application and the comments received as a result of the public notice. The decision may be appealed to the Hearing Examiner.

See Building Services for separate building permit process.

How does a pre-existing unit become legal?

Homeowners with existing non-permitted ADUs must apply to make them legal. Units that are not legalized will be subject to enforcement.

Pre-existing units must meet the same requirements as new ADUs, including parking and building code standards.

Note: Not all two or more-unit structures in single family zones are illegal. Such units may have been built under an old zoning code that allowed such development. If this is the case, the unit may be a legal non-conforming use. Applications to establish a legal non-conforming use are available at the Permit Center.

PUBLIC WORKS DEPARTMENT

- The ADU and main home may share water, sewer and natural gas services.
- An accessible shut-off valve must be upstream of the gas meter, on the exterior of the structure(s).
- A water meter must be installed, and occupants must be billed on the metered system.
- Any exterior utility lines being installed or altered must have their connections inspected as part of the building permit process.

BUILDING SERVICES DIVISION

Alterations and/or additions to create an ADU must comply with the building and electrical codes in effect at the time of building permit application. These are some of the specific requirements to consider:

Electrical:

- The primary residence and the ADU shall be served by a single electrical service, and single main service panel.
- Occupants of both units must have equal and unrestricted access to the main electrical shut-off.
- The service panel must have the capacity to safely handle loads attributed to two dwelling units as determined by the electrical code.

Plumbing:

- Both units may share common supply and waste plumbing systems.
- A shared water heater is allowed so long as occupants of both units have equal and unrestricted access to the appliance.
- The water service shut-off must be accessible to occupants of both units.

Smoke Detectors:

- Smoke detectors must be installed throughout both dwelling units, as required for remodels or additions. Smoke detectors must be hard-wired and interconnected, with battery back-up.

Heating:

- Both units must have independent heat sources.

Fire Separation:

- The construction of the walls and/or floor/ceiling assemblies which compose part or all of the separation of the units must be constructed as a one hour fire rated assembly. This may be accomplished with two layers of ½” gypsum wall board (GWB) on each side of the wall or one layer of 5/8” GWB on each side of the wall. *(Separation is not required when the ADU is within the primary residence and smoke alarms are interconnected)*
- Doors separating the units must be 1⅜” thick, solid-core, tight fitting, smoke gasketed doors, or a 20-minute rated door.

Exiting:

- The ADU must have an independent exit door with a clear width of at least 32” and all sleeping rooms must have emergency escape windows or doors as required for new single family residences.

Ceiling Heights & Room Sizes:

- The minimum ceiling height allowed for rooms and hallways is 7 feet.
- ADUs must have at least one habitable room with a floor area of no less than 70 square feet, and with a minimum dimension of 7 feet in any horizontal direction.

How do I apply for a building permit if I want to create an ADU?

See our handout titled “[Single Family & Duplex Submittal Guidelines](#)” for examples of building plans, requirements, and all necessary forms.

FEES

- Application fee for ADU permit + notice fee (due at the time of [ADU application submittal](#))
- Transportation impact fee, assessed at the apartment rate (due at the time of building permit issuance)
- Park impact fee, assessed at one-half the multifamily rate (due at the time of building permit issuance)
- Conversion of existing habitable space to an ADU may be exempt from impact fees if conditions in Title 19 BMC are met.
- Construction (building, plumbing, mechanical, electrical, etc.) permit fees, as applicable