

9 Converting Attics, Basements and Garages to Living Space



Bureau of
Development
Services
FROM CONCEPT
TO CONSTRUCTION



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www.Portland.gov/BDS

A building permit is required to convert attics, basements or garages to living or habitable space. Your project may also require electrical, plumbing or mechanical permits. If you are converting space by adding dormers or a second floor, you should review our guidelines for Residential Addition Permits Dormer or Upper Floor Permits. If you are building a new dwelling unit, you should apply for an Accessory Dwelling Unit (ADU) permit. For more information about ADU permits and residential addition permits, see brochure **#14, Major Residential Alterations and Additions**.

You can also find more information about application requirements for permits for ADUs and residential additions on the Portland.gov website.

Step 1: Research your property and what you need to convert your attic, basement or garage

Evaluating your existing space

In unfinished areas, existing features such as the strength of the existing home, ceiling heights, windows, stairs and insulation may not meet current building code requirements for living space. These conditions could make it expensive, difficult or impractical for you to change your attic, basement or garage into living space. In addition, zoning code requirements may affect your project.

Permits are reviewed under multiple city and state codes including:

- Oregon Residential Specialty Code
- Portland City Codes (Title 33 Zoning Code)

Other codes may apply based on the scope of work. You can find more information about city and state codes on Portland.gov.

When converting unfinished areas to living space, the code requires that the remodeled area conform to current code. The Bureau of Development Services has established alternative standards for conversion projects.

Zoning Code

- **Setbacks:** Conversion of some existing garages within the side or rear setbacks may be allowed with limits on size and height. Check with Planning and Zoning before conversion.
- **Parking:** To convert your garage to living space, you may need to provide a required onsite parking space. Your existing driveway may not meet this requirement.
- **Roof height:** If converting attic space to living space involves raising the roof, height regulations may affect your project.
- **Exterior changes:** Depending on the Zoning designation of your property, additional review may be needed if you want to alter the exterior of your home and garage.

Building Code

- **Firewall:** If any exterior wall is less than three feet from a property line, a fire-rated wall without openings will be required.
- **Structure:** Existing attic floor and supporting structure below would need to be evaluated to verify the adequacy of the existing framing to support live loads (such as weight of people, furniture, etc.) and structurally improved to meet current code if found deficient.
- **Dormers:** Adding a new dormer or enlarging an existing dormer may trigger structural improvements to the existing structure for the purpose of resisting wind or earthquake load and for floor live loads.
- **Basements:** If you are finishing a basement and the house is not currently bolted to the foundation, consider voluntary seismic strengthening while the floor framing and basement walls are exposed. See the Residential Seismic Strengthening brochure at www.portland.gov/bds/documents/residential-seismic-strengthening-methods-reduce-potential-earthquake-damage-brochure.

How to check the permit history for a house

Depending on the age of your house, we may have inspection cards or microfilmed plans that show the permit history for your house. It is important to verify the permit records, and not rely on the tax information from the county assessor's office. If "existing" finished attic or basement was not permitted, it will need to be legalized through a new permit. To be considered living space, you would need to submit for the same conversion permits as if the work was not already done.

Some records are available online, visit the How to Request Public Property Records webpage on Portland.gov. (www.portland.gov/bds/how-request-public-property-records#toc-request-property-records-online-)

Unfinished areas may not meet current building code requirements for living space. This includes:

- Ceiling height
- Emergency egress or emergency exit windows
- Stairs
- Insulation and Ventilation

These conditions could make it expensive, difficult or even impossible for you to convert into living space. The Bureau of Development Services allows special standards for existing situations.

Summary of Building Code Standards

These standards apply only to conversions that would increase livable space for the existing dwelling, not those that would add a dwelling unit (ADU).

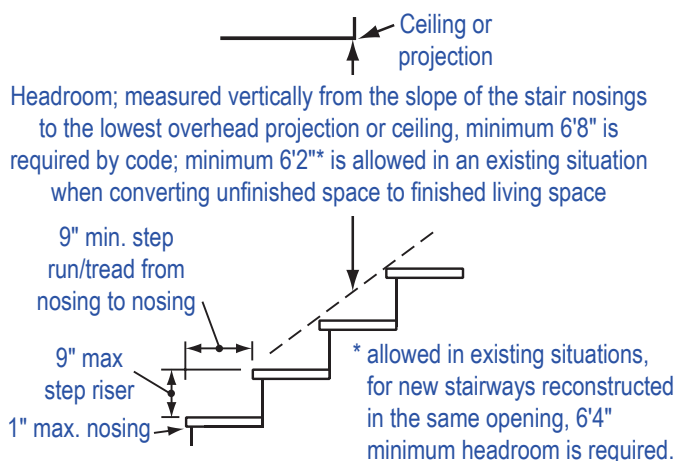
Minimum room area and ceiling height

- **Floor area and sloped ceilings:** Living space must have at least 70 square feet of floor area. Utility and storage rooms, closets, bathrooms or kitchens may be any size. In living space with sloped ceilings, no more than one half of the minimum required floor area may have a sloped ceiling less than 6'8" in height with no part of the required floor area less than five feet in height.
- **Ceiling height:** Where the ceiling is flat, living space may have a ceiling as low as 6'8". Beams, heating ducts, pipes, etc. are allowed as low as six feet from the floor if they are within two feet of a wall, or as low as 6'2" where they do not take up more than 10% of the floor area in the room where they are located. No projections below 6'8" may be within 3' of a door into the room.
- **Sloped bathroom ceilings:** In bathrooms with sloped ceilings, not more than 75 percent of the floor area is permitted to have a ceiling height less than 6'8", provided an area of 21 inches deep by 24 inches wide in front of toilets and lavatories has a minimum height of 6'4", measured from the finished floor. An area of 24 inches by 30 inches both in front of and inside of a tub or shower shall have a minimum height of 6'4", measured from the standing surface of the fixture.

EXISTING STAIRS

Stairs

- **Existing stairways:** An existing stairway leading to new living space may be steeper, narrower and have lower headroom than the current code allows.



- **Rise and run:** The stairway must have treads (runs) no smaller than nine inches and risers no higher than nine inches. The steps should be relatively even with the largest difference between the biggest and the smallest rise or run not more than a three-eighths inch.
- **Width:** Must be at least 30 inches.
- **Headroom:** Must be at least 6'2" measured vertically from the slope of the stair nosings to the lowest overhead projection or ceiling.
- **Landings:** Are required at the top and bottom of stairs. The landing's length and width must be at least 30" wide and 30" long and have at least 6'2" headroom.
- **Doorways:** Are allowed at the top of stairs as long as the door does not swing over the stairs. A door may not obstruct the landing at the bottom of the stairs.
- **Existing winder stairs:** which are triangular in shape, are allowed. New winder stairs must meet current code.

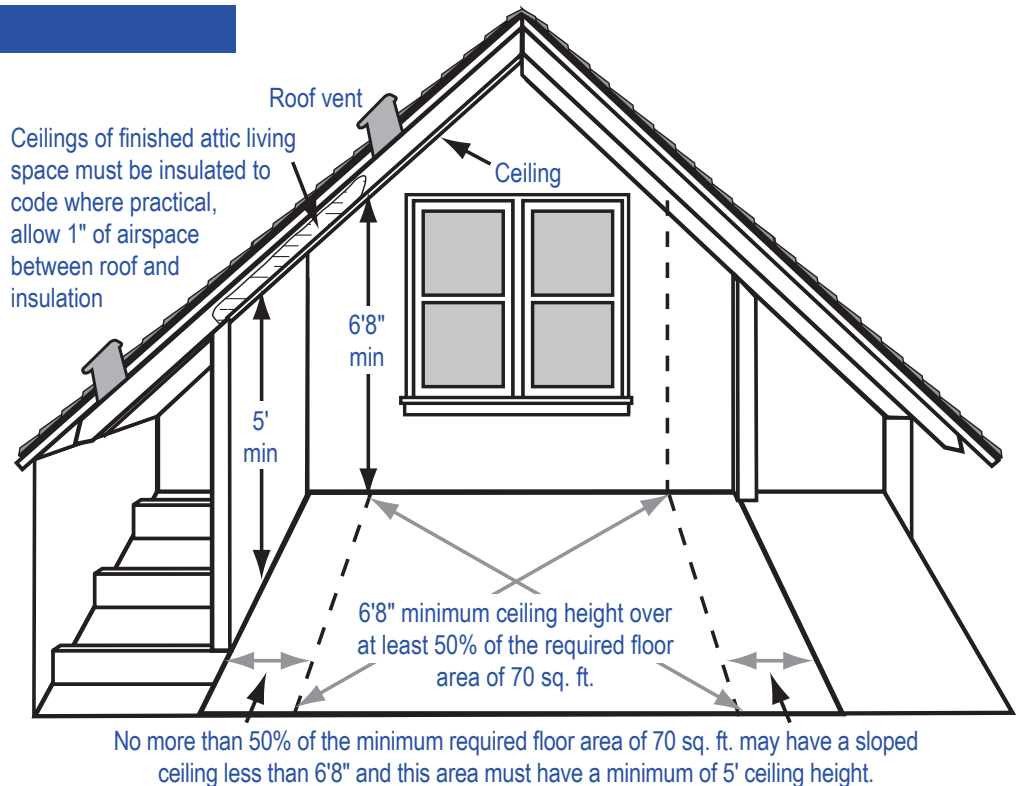
Rebuilt stairways: stairs reconstructed in the same opening can be a minimum of 30" wide, have a maximum riser height of 9" and a minimum of 6'4" headroom. All other criteria for a stair must meet current code requirements. See the Stairs Brochure (www.portland.gov/bds/documents/stairs-new-residential-building-permits-and-inspections-brochure-8) for these standards.

Existing Noncompliant stairs: Where an existing stair cannot be made to comply and another compliant means of egress is provided, the noncompliant stair shall either be rebuilt or walled off.

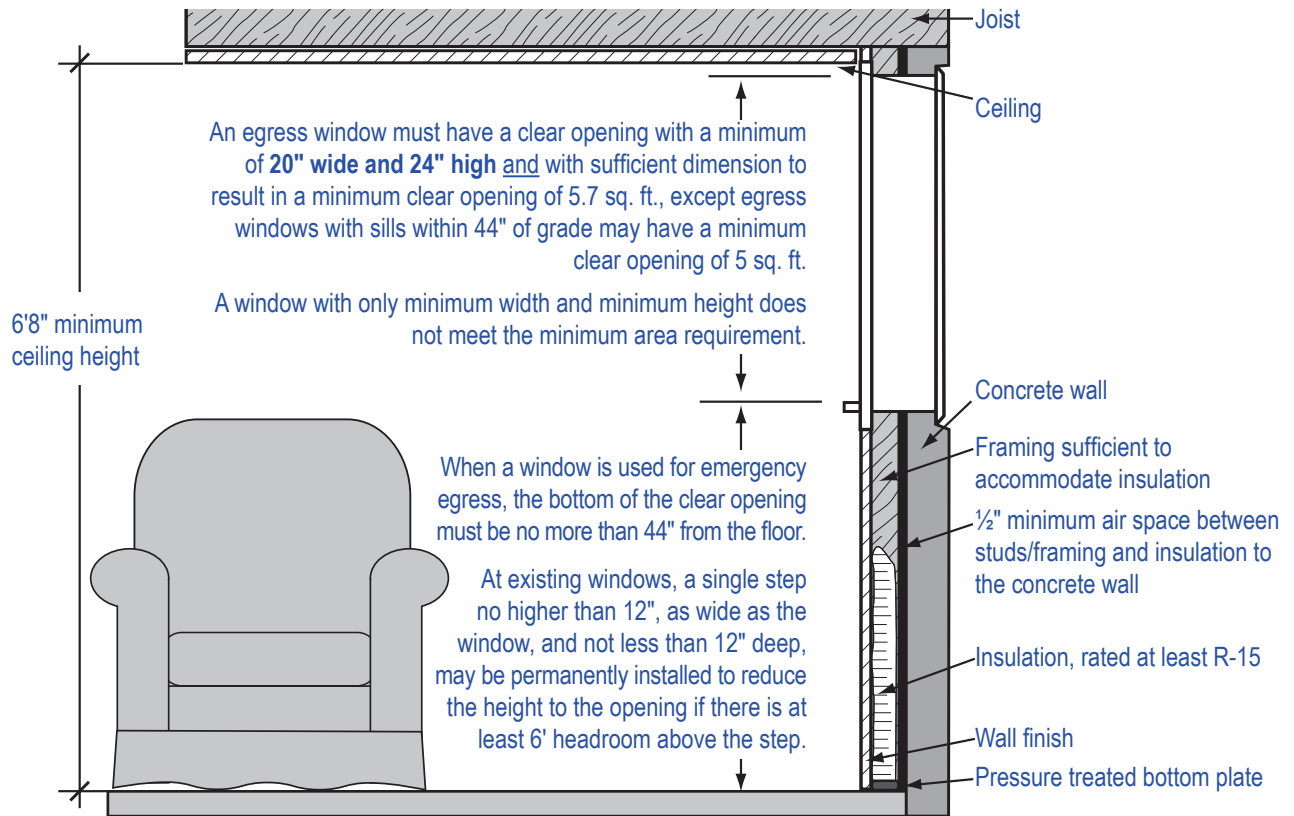
Doors and emergency escape and rescue openings (egress windows)

- **Door size:** The clear opening of a door that leads into a converted attic, basement or garage must be at least 6'2" high and 30 inches wide. Exterior doors used for emergency escape and rescue must be at least the same size.
- **All sleeping rooms:** must have at least one egress window or exterior door for escape or rescue in case of an emergency.
- **Egress window size:** An egress window must have a clear opening with a minimum width of at least 20 inches and a minimum height of at least 24 inches and with a sufficient dimension to result in a minimum clear opening of 5.7 square feet in area, except egress windows with sills within 44" of grade may have a minimum clear opening of 5 square feet.
NOTE: A window with only minimum width and minimum height does not meet the minimum area requirement.
- **Sill height:** The bottom of the egress window's clear opening may not be more than 44 inches above the floor. A single step, not less than 12 inches deep, no higher than 12 inches, and at least as wide as the window opening, may be permanently installed under an existing window to reduce the height to the bottom of the clear opening to 44 inches or less, provided there is at least six feet clear from the top of the step to the ceiling.
- **Exterior egress door:** In basements, an exterior door at least 6 feet 2 inches high and at least 30 inches wide, may be used to meet emergency egress requirements with no limit to the bottom of the clear opening height as long as the door is along a compliant stair, and is located at least one step below the level of the floor above.

ATTICS



BASEMENTS



Insulation and ventilation

- Additions that increase the floor area of the house must be insulated as if they were new construction.
- New windows or doors must meet current code requirements for energy conservation. Double glazed windows or storm windows placed over existing single glazed windows will be approved.
- Exposed framing must be insulated if finishes are removed from the exterior walls or roof. R-15 insulation is allowed between existing two-by-four studs or rafters. If the attic areas can be accessed without removing the finishes, they too must be insulated to the maximum extent possible to meet current code.
- Existing concrete exterior walls must be furred out with framing sufficient to accommodate the required insulation. Any wood in contact with concrete must be pressure treated wood.
- New construction affecting basement walls requires that the basement walls be insulated to R-15. Existing insulation in basement walls that is R-11 or greater will be approved.
- Attic and garage ceilings must be insulated to current code. When ceiling height is a problem, R-15 insulation with one inch airspace between the insulation and roof deck will be approved in spaces between existing two-by-four rafters. Roof ventilation is required to meet current code where insulation is added.
- Minor dormer additions, as defined within the Minor Additions and Dormers brochure (www.portland.gov/bds/documents/lateral-bracing-requirements-minor-additions-and-dormers-existing-1-and-2-family), may be constructed and insulated to match existing conditions.
- New wood floor joists that are installed over an existing concrete floor require that insulation be provided in the joist space with a vapor barrier below.
- Combustion air requirements must be verified for all fuel burning appliances when areas containing furnaces and water heaters are finished or made smaller.
- Habitable rooms must have natural ventilation provided by windows or doors to the outdoors with openings of at least 2.5 percent of the floor areas being vented, unless outdoor air is provided by a mechanical system.
- Habitable rooms must have light provided either by windows or doors to the outdoors with openings with a glass area of at least 6.8 percent of the room's floor areas, or permanently installed electrical lighting.
- Additional Energy Measures are required for conversions that are greater than 30 percent of the existing building heated floor area or more than 400 square feet in area, whichever is less. One additional measure must be selected from Table N1101.3 of the Oregon Residential Specialty Code (see portland.gov/bds/documents/2021-energy-efficiency-additional-measures-requirements).

Adding a bathroom to an unfinished basement

You can add a bathroom in the basement and leave the basement unfinished. In this case, the basement does not have to comply with all conversion standards. The ceiling height in the bathroom must follow the guidelines below.

The stair to the basement and a three-foot wide path through the basement from the stair must meet the headroom and other dimensional requirements listed. The other requirements listed (including exterior wall insulation, storm windows and egress or exit windows) are not required if no other habitable space is proposed in the basement.

If your project is limited to adding a bathroom, with no other conversion proposed, you may qualify to use the Simple Bathroom Permit process. (www.portland.gov/bds/residential-permitting/simple-bathroom-permits)

Add sinks or add a kitchen

If your project will add a sink outside of a bathroom or kitchen, you may need a covenant. The "Covenant for a Sink Outside of the Primary Kitchen, Bathroom or Laundry Room inside a Single-Family Dwelling" is also called a 2nd sink covenant.

This document affirms the addition does not create another dwelling unit. It also states the structure is still a single-family dwelling. Contact Planning and Zoning staff with questions. If required, this document must be recorded with Multnomah County before your permit can be issued.

If your final project adds a kitchen that is not closed off from the main kitchen in the house, it may qualify as an "Accessory Kitchen," and would not be considered as creating a separate dwelling unit. An Accessory Kitchen Covenant is required to be recorded before the permit could be issued. Please see the Building Official Determination 19-06: Accessory Kitchens in Single Family Dwellings on the Portland.gov website to see if your project qualifies.

If your final project will include both a non-accessory kitchen and a bathroom it may need to be permitted as an Additional Dwelling Unit (ADU). ADUs can be used independently of the remainder of the dwelling.

Building Code requirements define a "Dwelling Unit" as "a single unit providing complete independent living facilities for one or more persons, including permanent provisions for living, sleeping, eating, cooking and sanitation." The permit requirements for an ADU are different. For questions about what makes a dwelling unit, contact

Attic conversion or dormer additions, adding a bedroom or extra room

If converting attic space to living space would mean raising the roof, the zoning code height regulations may affect your project. If you are adding dormers or another story, visit apply for a dormer or second story addition for requirements.

Engineering calculations for attic conversion

When the scope of work will change the structural load, it is important that you submit engineering calculations that show the continuity of the load path from floors or other affected members all the way to the foundation.

You must determine if the existing attic floor structure is strong enough to carry the additional weight of people and furniture. It is very common that when tracing floor loads from the converted attic, it is the beam in the basement that will be overstressed. Situations like this are required to be resolved as part of the permit application. For more information, visit the Residential Engineering webpage on the Portland.gov website.

Floodplains

If your house is located in a floodplain, there are restrictions that may limit your ability to add or to significantly improve your house. The work may require retrofitting your house to be flood resistant.

Flood plain information is available on Portland Maps Flood Hazard gallery. If the property is located in a flood plain, talk to Site Development & Septic Review in the early stages for what is needed.

Converting a garage

- **Parking:** You will need to show how you will provide the required parking space. Parking in your driveway alone may not meet the parking requirement.
- **Setbacks:** If you want to convert a detached garage to living space, it may not meet setback requirements. The zoning code may not allow living space to in the setback areas, even if it allows the garage to be in that location.
- **Structural:** A detached garage may not have been built to the building code standards for living space. You will need to upgrade any structural deficiencies. Some garages may not have needed a permit because it was previously exempt due to its use and size. In this case, the garage will need to have all structural

elements submitted and reviewed as part of the conversion to living space.

- Fire separation: If an exterior wall of a garage being converted to living space is within 3’ of a property line (except for a property line along a public right of way), it will require fire rated construction. There may also be limitations on the allowed eave or rake projections from that wall. Review the Eaves and Exterior Wall Protection guide on the Portland.gov website.
- Right of Way: If your project requires a new driveway or construction in the public right-of-way, then Portland Department of Transportation (PBOT) will review the project. They may require separate transportation permit for this work as well. For more information about right-of-way requirements, contact the PBOT at 503-823-7002.
- Permit fees

Permit fees (www.portland.gov/bds/current-fee-schedules) are based on the type of permit, the work proposed, the valuation of the work, and the staff that need to review the work.

Still need help? Schedule a 15-minute appointment

If you have questions after reviewing the information on this page, we recommend you book a free 15-minute appointment with us. (www.portland.gov/bds/early-assistance/15-minute-appointments)

This is an optional step. We're here for you if you have

Contact Us

Bureau of Development Services
City of Portland, Oregon
1900 SW 4th Avenue, Portland, OR 97201
www.portland.gov/bds

Office Hours:

Monday through Friday, 8 a.m. to 5 p.m.
BDS main number: 503-823-7300

Permit Information is available at the following location:

- Development Services Center (First Floor)
For Hours Call 503-823-7310 or visit www.portland.gov/bds
- Permitting Services (Second Floor)
For Hours Call 503-823-7310 or visit www.portland.gov/bds

Important Telephone Numbers

BDS main number	503-823-7300
DSC automated information line	503-823-7310
Permit information for electrical, mechanical, plumbing, sewer and signs.....	503-823-7363
Building code information	503-823-1456
Planning and Zoning information	503-823-7526
Permitting process and fee information	503-823-7357
Permit resources and records	503-823-7660
Residential information for one and two family dwellings....	503-823-7388
BDS 24-hour inspection request line (requires IVR number and three-digit inspection code)	503-823-7000
Oregon Relay Service	711
Tree Hotline	503-823-8733

For more detailed information regarding the bureau’s hours of operation and available services:

**VISIT OUR WEBSITE:
WWW.PORTLAND.GOV/BDS**

Note: All information in this brochure is subject to change.

Traducción e interpretación | Chuyển Ngữ hoặc Phiên Dịch | 翻译或传译
Turjumida ama Fasiraadda | 翻訳または通訳 | Письменный или устный перевод
Traducere sau Interpretare | 번역 및 통역 | الترجمة التحريرية أو الشفوية |
ການແປພາສາ ຫຼື ການອະທິບາຍ | Письмовий або усний переклад



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