



# City of Houston Permitting 101

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**Permitting is a key part of the construction process. From renovation to new building, knowing when and how to attain a proper building permit can be the difference between a successful project and an unfinished structure piled high with fines and/or legal fees.**

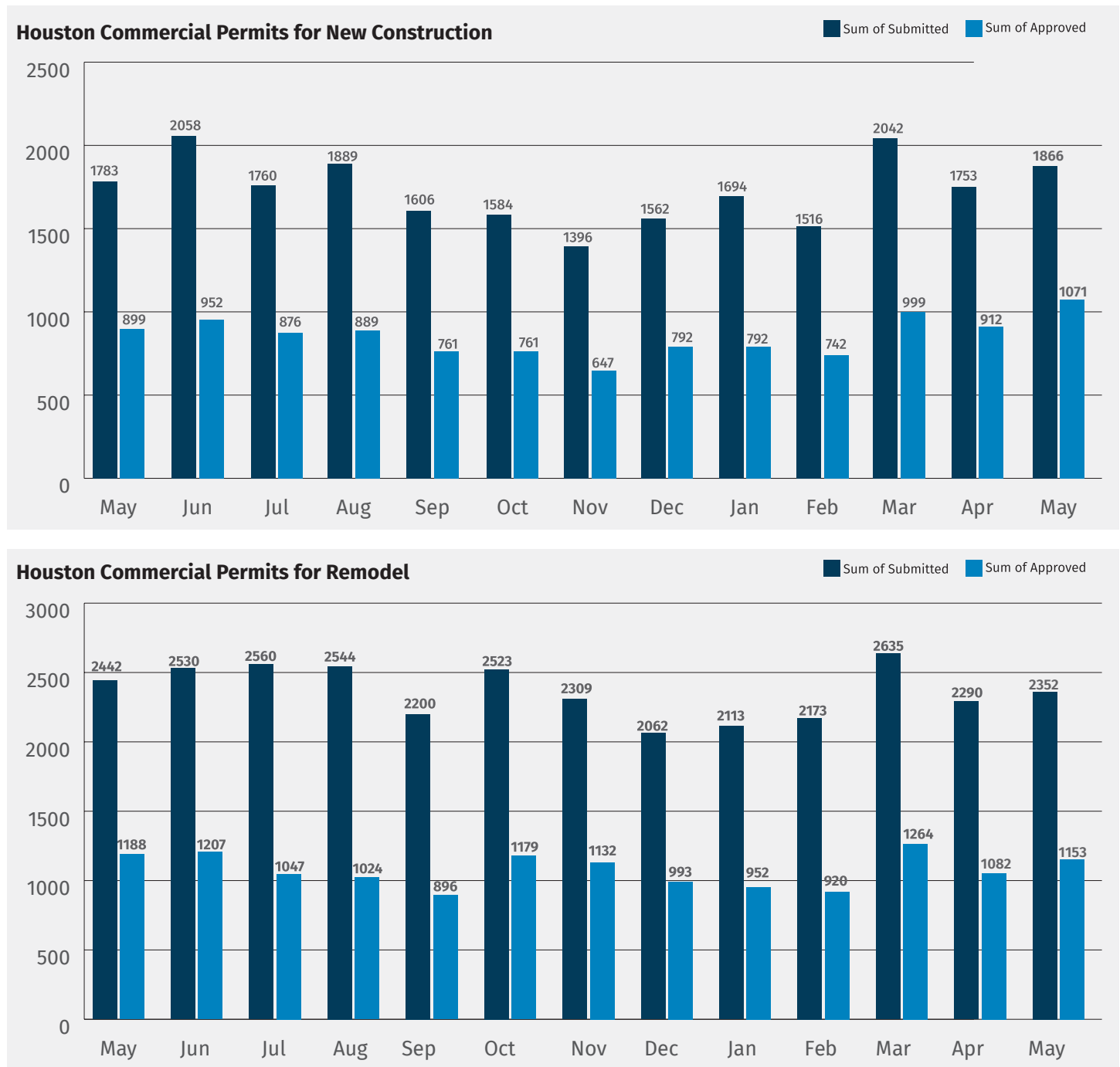
To help you better understand the permitting process for construction projects in Houston, in this article we cover:

1. City of Houston Permitting by the numbers
2. What a permit is and how to know if you need one
3. How to get a permit in Houston, Texas
4. What happens after you receive a permit
5. Common obstacles and how to avoid them
6. What is the City of Houston doing to expedite permit approval?

We hope that after reading this you will feel much more confident moving forward with your project.



With a massive post COVID increase in construction activity, the City of Houston is seeing the highest volume of permits in years. In the beginning of May, there were approximately 1,773 commercial plans and 2,633 residential plans. See below graph as updated through May 2022.



As you can see in the above chart, in both new construction and remodels, the city is approving almost half the volume of project permits submitted on a monthly basis.

Before we dive into the complexities of the permit process, we will first cover the basics of what a building permit is and if you need one.



## What Is a Building Permit?

A construction permit is no different from any other permit you may have come across; it gives you permission to perform a certain task. In the case of your real estate project, a building permit is the city's way of giving you the right to begin construction.

Most permits carry with them certain restrictions on what can and cannot be done over the course of the project, and are generally limited to a specific duration. In Houston, most construction permits are active for 180 days, at which point an inspection is required if the project is to continue.

[Houston's Permitting Center](#) issues a number of different permits, including building, contractor, demolition and tree permits.

## Do You Need a Building Permit?

The City of Houston indicates a building permit is required for most projects inside the corporate city of Houston limits; these include, but are not limited to: Construction work on new or existing buildings. Remodeling (excluding painting, wallpapering) Building repair work.

However, that does not mean you necessarily need a permit for every project you plan to pursue. For smaller alterations to a space and ones that are not likely to change the property's physical structure in any significant way, a permit may not be required. For example, if all you plan to do is paint the walls and install new carpet in your office, a permit is likely not needed.

Even without a permit, your work must still comply with the building codes and ordinances in your area. Because of this, we recommend consulting with an architectural firm prior to beginning even a small project to ensure you are following all the applicable guidelines.

# How to Get a Building Permit in Houston

The permitting process in Houston can be complicated, especially if you haven't gone through it before. The process requires that you work through a lot of different departments allowing more potential for delays. Houston has a reputation for having a complicated and slow permitting process where a single misstep can set you back weeks, if not months.

It is a challenge to approach the permitting process alone, and we highly recommend utilizing an architectural firm to help guide you through the procedures. An experienced design and construction firm based in Houston will be familiar with the city's permitting process and can help your project move forward on schedule. The following guide outlines the process of obtaining a permit with the assistance of an experience architect, and not a guide on how to handle the process alone.

## Before Submitting Your Application

Before your permit application ever makes it into the city's hands, there are a number of steps that need to be completed. The below flow chart summarizes the application process.

Keep in mind that there will be a fee associated with the review process. The fee can range anywhere from a few hundred dollars to thousands and higher based on the square footage of your project. You can find the estimated

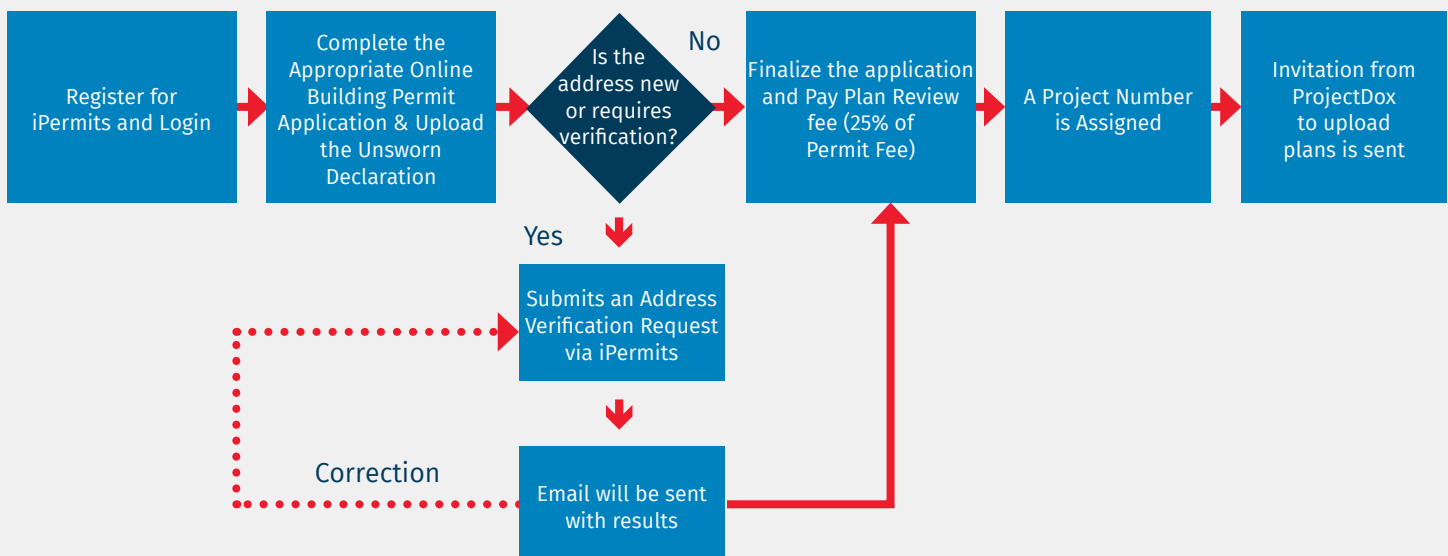
fee for your project type on the [City of Houston > Fee Schedules website](#).

## Permit Review Process

In Houston, the Houston Public Works Department is responsible for reviewing all requests for commercial permits. Participants in this review process include staff from the building department, fire department, Flood Plain Management, Traffic, and Storm Water. The department offers several review types, including:

- One Stop Plan Review: Review of minor remodels/ lease space build-outs in a shorter period of time when certain restrictions are met. Refer to Form CE-1042 to find out if your project qualifies.
- Customer Paid Overtime (Temporarily unavailable)
- Quick Start Program: For projects exceeding \$1 million valuation with a limited number of reviews remaining, a 24-hour turnaround is available.) Refer to Form CE-1071 for more information.

## Application



The type of review you pursue will depend mostly on the scale and type of your project. As with fees, each type of review also carries with it different estimated review times that you and your project team will need to account for.

It is also worth keeping in mind that, while you may receive the results of your review within the city's estimated review time, the results may indicate that you need to change your plans and submit them for review once again. This is where the challenge of permitting delays can begin to present issues for your project. Your designer and contractor will need to work with the city to find a plan that works for both parties.

#### **TELLEPSSEN PRO TIP** **Enlist a Permit Expediter**

To help speed up the permitting process, many project teams choose to use the services of a permit expeditor.

These professionals have extensive knowledge of the city's permitting process and advise their clients on how best to design a project so that it receives permits quickly. Your design professional will be able to help you determine if you would benefit from hiring an expeditor and should be able to refer you to qualified professionals.

One such solution might be a phased permit approach. The City of Houston allows phased permitting for each stage of construction prior to submitting or permitting the next phase. This process may be useful for fast-track projects where design continues beyond the schedule to break ground.

Below are some examples of partial permits:

- Site Grading
- Site Paving and Underground Utilities
- Site and Foundation (requires recorded plat)
- Superstructure (concrete buildings, or non-rated steel)
- Shell only
- Shell and core
- Buildouts by floor (noncombustible only)

*NOTE: Phased permits must be obtained in order of construction. For more detailed information, refer to the Form CE-1198 Phased Construction Permitting Options*

#### **Receiving Your Permit**

Once the city approves your application and you receive your permit, you are ready to begin working on your project. However, the city will still be involved at different stages using inspections.

Inspections are conducted through the Public Works and Engineering > Planning and Development Services Division, and their purpose is to ensure that the project followed the guidelines in the permit and meets the relevant health and safety codes.

Depending on the extent of the work being done and the project's time frame, inspections can occur during construction or once construction is complete. Since permits expire 180 days after they are issued without inspection, an inspection will need to be conducted before then to keep your permit active.

It is up to you and your project team to schedule an inspection at the necessary time. The city allows you to schedule inspections online or over the phone. In most cases, the General Contractor awarded the project will be responsible for calling in inspections and following the city's process for obtaining the appropriate Certificate of Occupancy (C of O).

# Common Building Permit Obstacles and How to Avoid Them

You are bound to encounter a few obstacles while navigating the permitting process. While every project is unique, the Tellepsen team has noticed a few common obstacles and has tips for how to avoid them.

## Your Permit is Rejected

After putting so much effort into getting your project designed and submitted for review, it can be disheartening to find out that your permit application was rejected. It can also be stressful for your wallet, as a rejection means you will need to go through the entire process again, spending more of your time and money.

As obvious as it seems, a simple way to avoid this is to make sure your application is filled out completely and correctly and that your project is not breaking any relevant guidelines for your area. These steps can go a long way towards helping your project make it through the review process successfully.

Having your design team work closely with your contractor will help reduce errors on the plans and, if the plans are rejected or need additional clarification, your project team will be able to quickly address them and re-submit.

However, some projects are more complicated than others and may require more effort to get your permit. In this case, working

closely with the city during your planning phases can help you have more success when submitting your application. The City of Houston's website <https://www.houstonpermittingcenter.org/> can be a great resource for this.

## You Didn't Allow Enough Time for the Permitting Process

Like we mentioned before, it can sometimes take months for you to receive your permit to begin work.

Because of this, it is important when looking any construction project that you begin the process well in advance of your required occupancy date.

Not only do you need enough time to see all options on the market and negotiate the best terms, but you also need to allow ample time to build-out the space to meet your needs.

We hope this article helped answer some questions and calm some reservations you may have had about the permitting process in Houston.

If you would like help navigating the permitting process for your office construction project or to learn more about how Tellepsen can help with your upcoming office build-out or new construction project, visit [tellepsen.com](https://tellepsen.com).

## TELLEPSEN PRO TIP

### 90 Percent Complete Page Flip

Once the architect's plans are 90% complete, including the Mechanical, Electrical and

Plumbing (MEP) drawings, have your project manager sit down with you and the architect to review each page thoroughly.

This will help with quality control of the drawings as well as confirm that the scope of work and finish options selected are correct. Not only will this help to reduce the chance of your permit being rejected, but it could lead to cost savings if any errors or incorrect scope are discovered.

See the following page for Pro Tips for Navigating City of Houston Permitting as provided by **J. Hal Caton, AIA, CBO (Emeritus) "The Code Doctor"**



# Pro Tips for Navigating City of Houston Permitting

\*provided by J. Hal Caton, AIA, CBO (Emeritus) "The Code Doctor"

## Things that **MUST** be included with the Application

- ☐ **Application Form**  
The information to completely fill one out must be provided to the person making application.
- ☐ **Owners Declaration**  
A signed Owner's Declaration is required for every permit application. For MOST (but not all) tenant spaces, the "Owner" is the property owner, NOT the tenant.
- ☐ **Plan Review Fee**  
While not required at the time of application it MUST be paid after approval of the application but PRIOR to uploading plans.

## Things that **MUST** be included with the **FIRST PLAN SUBMITTAL**

- ☐ **Prerequisites Checklist**  
Is provided by the City and must be filled out AND submitted with the plans
- ☐ **Survey**  
A copy of a survey is REQUIRED when submitting plans for a new building or an addition.
- ☐ **Remodel projects are required to have an Asbestos Survey.**

## Things that **SHOULD** be included with the **FIRST PLAN SUBMITTAL**

- ☐ **Plat**  
A copy of a plat is required to be submitted prior to Building Permit approval
- ☐ **Multifamily**  
Multifamily Performance Standards approvals are done through the Planning Department (NOT through the Building Permit process), so need to be completed BEFORE submitting plans for Building Permit review.
- ☐ **Historic Buildings**  
Approvals are done through the Planning Department (NOT through the Building Permit process), so need to be completed BEFORE submitting plans for Building Permit review.
- ☐ **Plan And Profile Drawings**  
These should be for connections to City Utilities should be SUBMITTED to Public Works before submitting plans for Building Permit review. Copies

of the preliminary drawings WITH THE LOG NUMBER NOTED ON THEM must submitted as part of the building permit plan package.

- ☐ **Energy Code**  
It is not likely that your project is EXEMPT from the Energy Code.
  - Use ASHRAE 90.1 or energy modelling software in difficult situations.
  - The printout from the COMcheck software is almost always REQUIRED to be submitted.

## Things to **TRY TO** include with the **FIRST PLAN SUBMITTAL**

- ☐ **Complete Plans**  
Less than 75% complete will result in MASSIVE City comments AND likely will add ANOTHER review cycle (currently 6 weeks) before getting approved
- ☐ **Wastewater Capacity Reservation**  
Having it available for the FIRST submittal will likely result in a Utilities approval the first time through.
- ☐ **The Impact Fee does not have to be paid at the time of submittal, but must be paid before a permit will be issued.**

## Other Circumstances

- ☐ **Flood Plain**  
Both remodel and new projects in a flood plain take longer and need special documentation that needs to be attached to the first submittal for Building Permit.
- ☐ **Use ASCE 7 Hazard Tool to determine the design wind speed for your project.**
- ☐ **Restaurants**  
Have many review-related issues, which vary by circumstances. The pitfalls are numerous, so consult with your permit expediter as EARLY as possible.



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