

Retaining Wall Permit Checklist

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PART 1: MEASURE YOUR WALL CORRECTLY

Retained height = footing bottom to wall top (not visible height above grade)

- **Measure from the bottom of the footing to the top of the wall**

This is 'retained height' used for permit comparisons. A wall 2.5 ft visible + 14-inch footing = 3 ft 8 in retained.

- **Confirm your state's permit threshold (3 ft or 4 ft)**

Most states: 4 ft (IRC). California cities, Maryland, Fairfax VA, FL coastal counties: often 3 ft. Use permit checker at RetainingWallPermit.pages.dev

- **Check for surcharge above retained soil**

Driveway, parking, pool, building foundation, or ascending slope = surcharge. Permit required at any height.

- **Check if wall is part of a tiered system**

Two walls closer than 3× the lower wall height = tiered system. Add both heights together for threshold comparison.

- **Measure distance from wall face to all property lines**

Most jurisdictions require permit for any wall within 3–5 ft of a property line regardless of height.

PART 2: BEFORE YOU APPLY

- **Identify your permit-issuing jurisdiction (city or county)**

Inside city limits = city building dept. Outside city limits (unincorporated) = county building dept.

- **Call building department and confirm permit requirement**

Ask about your specific wall height, surcharge, and tiered configuration. Get confirmation in writing.

- **Ask whether engineer-stamped plans are required**

Required in most jurisdictions for walls over 4 ft, surcharge conditions, tiered systems, and many CA jurisdictions over 3 ft.

- **Confirm permit fee and how to pay**

- **Get HOA approval if applicable (get this BEFORE spending on engineering)**

HOA approval and building permits are separate requirements. You need both.

- **Call 811 (call before you dig) — required by law before excavation**

Utility locates take 2–3 business days. Do this before footing inspection.

PART 3: APPLICATION DOCUMENTS

- Site plan to scale showing lot, structures, wall location, and distances to property lines
- Wall cross-section drawing (height, footing dimensions, reinforcement, drainage, backfill)
- Drainage design (perforated pipe, gravel layer, discharge outlet location)
- Material specifications (block type, timber grade, concrete mix, rebar schedule)
- Engineer-stamped plans (if required — must bear PE stamp licensed in your state)
- Completed permit application form (from your building department)
- Permit fee payment

PART 4: DURING CONSTRUCTION

- **NEVER POUR FOOTING CONCRETE BEFORE THE FOOTING INSPECTION PASSES**

- Post permit card on site before any work begins
- Schedule footing inspection BEFORE pouring concrete (call 24–48 hrs ahead)
- Install drainage pipe and gravel before backfilling (inspector verifies at final)

- Build to approved plans — any field changes require prior written approval

PART 5: FINAL INSPECTION AND SIGN-OFF

- Schedule final inspection after wall is complete and backfill is in place
- Pass final inspection and receive signed-off permit card
- File permit card and stamped plans permanently with property records

These documents will be requested when you sell. Store with deed, survey, and other permanent records.

QUESTIONS TO ASK YOUR BUILDING DEPARTMENT

1. Do I need a permit for a retaining wall that retains ____ feet of soil?
 2. Is there a driveway or slope above the wall — does that change the answer?
 3. Do I need engineer-stamped plans for my wall height and conditions?
 4. What is the permit fee for this type of wall?
 5. What is your current review timeline for residential retaining wall permits?
 6. Do you offer over-the-counter same-day review for simple walls?
 7. Can I apply online, or must it be in person?
 8. What inspections are required and when should I schedule them?
 9. Is there also a grading permit required for earthwork with this wall?
 10. Do I need to notify my neighbor before building near the property line?
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Disclaimer: This checklist provides general guidance for the retaining wall permit process. Requirements vary by jurisdiction and change over time. Always verify specific requirements with your local building department. RetainingWallPermit.pages.dev is not affiliated with any government agency.