



TOWN OF WATERTOWN CODE ENFORCEMENT

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Frequently Asked Questions - Zoning Help Desk

Why do we have Code Enforcement?

Code Enforcement is the commitment to provide a safe, healthy and attractive environment for all residents, businesses and visitors to Watertown through the enforcement of [Zoning](#) and all Town [Code of Ordinances](#).

How does Code Enforcement work?

Zoning and the Code of Ordinances are enforced proactively by routine patrols and through notice of violations by citizens to the Code Enforcement Office. If a violation is found that is not causing imminent danger to life, limb, property or health, Code Enforcement will try to contact the resident or business and make them aware of the problem. The resident or business will be given a specific amount of time (usually seven [7] days) to correct the violation. If the problem is not resolved within the allotted timeframe, the resident or business may be issued a Citation.

I recently received a Warning for a Code violation. Is this the same thing as getting a ticket?

No, a Warning is a notice to the property owner or resident that there is a violation of one (1) or more Town ordinances. If the violation has not been corrected with the allotted time frame indicated on the Notice, the resident or business may be issued a ticket. If you have any questions regarding your notice, please contact the Code Enforcement Office at 617-972-6427 for more information.

What are typical code violations?

The most common code violations include:

- Front yard parking;
- Illegal driveways;
- Unregistered vehicles parked on private property;
- Unpermitted signs and/or banners;
- Working without permits;
- Unpermitted residential basement/attic units;
- Vegetation overgrowth (too high/encroaching onto the public way/sidewalk);
- No clearing the sidewalk of snow and ice (business only); and,
- Illegal dumping, etc.

What is my zoning?

You can determine the zoning designation of your property quickly and easily by using our [online mapping](#) tool, (Zoning and Land Use Application). You can look up all relevant zoning information by providing the address or block and lot number of the property in question.

What can I build under my zoning? How high can I build on my property?

Table 5.04, prescribes the basic development standards for lots in Watertown. Other exceptions and/or special district standards can also be found in the zoning ordinance in Section 5.00.

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What's a plot plan?

A plot plan is a plan of your property prepared by a professional land surveyor showing the lot area and the dimensions along all sides, front, and rear.

- Do not confuse a mortgage inspection plan with that of a plot plan. The mortgage plan is usually prepared and used for bank purposes only. They contain disclaimers, such as “not to be used to locate streets / property lines.”
- Plot plans are a protection for yourself and your neighbor.
- For more information on Plot Plans:
- [Massachusetts Association of Land Surveyors & Civil Engineers](#)

Can I build a building (or have a use) that one or more of my neighbors have, even though the zoning doesn't allow it?

No. All new buildings and changes to existing buildings must abide by the zoning regulations that are currently in place, even if many nearby buildings predate the zoning change, and even if the zoning change was only made recently.

Is there any way to get a variance from the zoning regulations?

How do I get one?

Variations from the existing zoning are possible. Applications for a variance are considered by the Town's Board of Appeals (ZBA). Property owners seeking a variance must demonstrate that there is: 1) something unique to the size, shape, topography of the property which prevents meeting the required development standards, 2) there are unnecessary hardships in meeting the required development standards, 3) granting of the variance would not be a substantial detriment to the neighborhood, and 4) that granting of the variance would be in keeping with the intent of the zoning ordinance. See _____ for regulations applying to variances, or contact the Zoning Office to learn more.

What does “as-of-right” mean?

As-of-right development complies with the rules found in the Zoning Ordinance and does not require any discretionary review from the Planning Board, or Board of Appeals. The Building Inspector and Zoning Inspector review the building plans to determine compliance with the Zoning Ordinance and the Building Code and issues building permits accordingly.

What is Front Yard Parking?

When a vehicle parks in an area on the property that is not deemed to be the driveway, and the vehicle is in front of the structure. Also, when a vehicle parks blocking the front steps or walkway of property. The town does not allow front yard parking at any time.

What is an Unpermitted Driveway and how do I permit a new or modified driveway?

Typically an unpermitted driveway can be identified by an area where a vehicle is accessing a lot outside of the driveway apron and/or an area where a vehicle is parking and is blocking egress from a building/residence and/or is blocking the sidewalk. A new driveway or an expansion/modified driveway requires a sign-off from the Zoning Enforcement Officer/Inspector and a permit from the Department of Public Works. A [flow chart](#) and [brochure](#) can be found on the [Code Enforcement webpage](#).

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What does it mean to have vegetation overgrown on my property?

As a general rule properties grass cannot be higher than 12 inches in height, and bushes, hedges, and/or tree limbs cannot extend more than 6 inches into the town sidewalk, unless such limbs are a minimum of eight (8) feet above the sidewalk. Vegetation is also restricted in height for *corner properties* in an area known as the [Corner Triangle Area](#). The Corner Triangle Area is defined as the area bounded by the street lot lines and a straight line drawn between points on each such lot line twenty-five (25) feet from the intersection of said lot lines or extension thereof.

How long can I have an unregistered vehicle on my property?

The town allows for a property owner to have a single unregistered vehicle for no longer than 60-days on the property. After the allotted amount of time has expired the vehicle must be removed, registered or placed within an enclosed garage.

Can I put a detached garage (or shed) on my property?

Yes. If located five (5) feet from the rear and side lot lines, not be located in the front yard and must be single story, not exceed twelve (12) feet if a flat roof or eighteen (18) feet if a pitched roof. Detached buildings like garages and sheds count toward the maximum building coverage for a lot, prescribed in Table 5.04 of the Watertown Zoning Ordinance. Accessory Buildings and Structures greater than 200 square feet require a building permit.

How high can my fence be? And where can it be located?

The Zoning Code regulates the height of fences. In residence districts, the maximum height of a fence is six (6) feet, and the maximum height in non-residential districts is eight (8) feet. Fences constructed along, or adjacent to a driveway are limited to 36-inches in height from the front lot line for a distance of 15-feet, back into the property; in addition to any fence placed along the lot line abutting the street or public way. Corner properties are further limited to fence heights in the Corner Triangle Area, defined as the area bounded by the street lot lines and a straight line drawn between points on each such lot line twenty-five (25) feet from the intersection of said lot lines or extension thereof.

My neighbor put a fence up with the unfinished side facing me, is it legal?

There are no zoning requirements about the material or orientation of a fence.

Can a business have a sign on the sidewalk?

The town does not allow signs of any kind to be placed in the town right of way, neither the sidewalk nor road are allowed to have any signage posted. All other signs must be permitted by the Department of Community Development and Planning.

How long does a business have to shovel the sidewalk after it snows?

A business has 4 Hours after precipitation stops falling to clear a path at least 36 inches wide from face of property out on all sidewalks abutting the property. The town currently does not have an ordinance in place to require residents to clear their abutting sidewalks of snow and ice.

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Can I run a business out of my home?

Yes, Home Office is allowed “by-right” and is defined as a business, profession or occupation conducted within a residential building or accessory structure for gain or support by residents of the dwelling that conforms to the definition and requirements of a Home Occupation, except having no employees, no deliveries, and no customers that visit the site.

A Home Occupation requires the approval of a Special Permit by the Board of Appeals and must meet the criteria established in [Section 2.35](#) of the Watertown Zoning Ordinance.

For further information, please contact the Code Enforcement Office at 617-972-6427.