

Seattle Permits

— part of a multi-departmental City of Seattle series on getting a permit

Residential Use of a Floating Home, House Barge, Floating On-Water Residence, or Vessel With a Dwelling Unit

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The Seattle Department of Construction and Inspections (SDCI) enforces City shoreline regulations and other laws that regulate uses and construction over water. All floating residences must comply with Seattle's Shoreline Master Program (SSMP) rules as contained in Seattle Municipal Code (SMC) Chapter 23.60A. This Tip is a summary; you should consult the code and obtain guidance from SDCI if you are planning to move or change your floating residence.

As part of the 2015 updated Seattle Shoreline Master Program, owners of floating residences other than conventional recreational vessels must:

1. Obtain and display a City-issued identification number; and
2. Follow City-established best management practices; and
3. Obtain SDCI authorization prior to starting any external repair, remodel, expansion, or rebuilding.

This Tip is intended to provide guidance about the different categories of floating residences and what types of development may be authorized. Be sure to read all the descriptions below in order to determine which category is likely to apply to your residence. SDCI will determine if your residence over water qualifies as a floating home, house barge, floating on-water residence, or vessel containing a dwelling unit.

Floating Homes

A floating home is a legally-established, single-family dwelling constructed on a float that is moored, anchored, or otherwise secured in waters. Seattle's construction codes apply to floating homes and have requirements similar to those for houses built on land. Floating homes must be located in legally-established floating home moorages and must have direct connections to sewer and water utilities, in addition to other location and design restrictions. Floating homes must have been legally established within the City or have had a building permit on June 15, 2015.

Owners of floating homes must register their home with the City; obtain and display a City-issued identification number; and follow City-established best management practices.

If you have a registered Floating Home, you must obtain SDCI authorization before you start any exterior repair, remodel, expansion, or rebuilding.

House Barges and Floating On-Water Residences (FOWRs)

The SSMP defines a house barge as a vessel that:

1. Is designed and used for navigation but lacks a means of self-propulsion and steering equipment or capability (for example, it is designed and used for navigation by towing); and
2. Has been continuously moored and used for residential purposes at a recreational marina within the City of Seattle since July 1, 1990 or earlier and was previously registered with the City of Seattle.

A Floating On-Water Residence (FOWR) is a floating structure that was used as a dwelling unit and moored under a lease or ownership interest at a marina within the City of Seattle before July 1, 2014.

Owners of house barges and FOWRs must verify their residence with the City; obtain and display a City-issued identification number; and follow City-established best management practices. House Barge owners can choose to verify their residence as either

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a House Barge or as a FOWR. The two residences are subject to similar development regulations. If your contact information or the ownership of your craft changes, please notify SDCI so that we can update our records.

Seattle codes require a house barge to be located at a recreational marina ([SMC 23.60A.204](#)) and a FOWR to be located at a recreational or commercial marina ([SMC 23.60A.912](#)). If you move your House Barge or FOWR, you must notify SDCI of the new slip number and/or marina. Renting moorage at a marina is a commercial lease agreement and a civil matter between lessee and lessor. The City is unable to assist owners with securing moorage, and it is the responsibility of the FOWR or house barge owner to find moorage that meets Seattle code standards.

If you have a verified House Barge or FOWR, you must obtain SDCI authorization before you start any exterior repair, rebuild, or expansion. Replacement of your House Barge or FOWR requires a Shoreline Substantial Development Permit.

Vessels Containing Dwelling Units (VDUs)

The SSMP defines a vessel containing a dwelling unit as a ship, boat, barge, or other floating craft that:

1. Is designed for navigation; and
2. Is used for navigation; and
3. Does not interfere with the normal public use of the water; and
4. Contains a dwelling unit; and
5. Was used as a dwelling unit before June 15, 2015; and
6. Was lawfully moored within the City of Seattle before June 15, 2015.

If your vessel is a *conventional recreational vessel* as outlined in [SMC 23.60A.214.B](#), you do not need to verify your vessel with the City. If you own a VDU that is not one of the types of vessels listed in [SMC 23.60A.214](#) and you wish to use your vessel as a residence, you must verify the vessel with the City and obtain and display the City-issued identification plate.

A VDU must be designed to be used for water transportation. If a VDU is used for residential purposes it must be a vessel able to travel under its own power to open water, with a method for steering and propulsion, deck fittings, navigational and nautical equipment, and the required marine hardware.

A VDU must be located at a marina that meets the standards found in [23.60A.200](#). If you are renting moorage at a marina, it is a commercial lease agreement and a civil matter between lessee and lessor. If your vessel is evicted from the moorage, it is the responsibility of the VDU owner to find moorage that meets Seattle code standards.

If you have a vessel containing a dwelling unit that is required to be verified under [23.60A.214.D](#), you must obtain SDCI authorization prior to starting any exterior repair, or remodel, or rebuilding.

Questions?

If you have an on-water residence that you think needs to be registered or verified with the City, please call (206) 684-0616 and request the necessary forms.

If you have a question about residential uses permitted over water in Seattle, please contact the shoreline inspector on SDCI's Code Compliance staff at (206) 684-0616.

If you wish to report a complaint about a potential violation of Seattle's shoreline regulations, call SDCI's 24-hour Complaint Hotline at (206) 615-0808.

Access to Information

Links to electronic versions of Seattle DCI **Tips**, **Director's Rules**, and the **Seattle Municipal Code** are available on the "Tools & Resources" page of our website at www.seattle.gov/sdci. Paper copies of these documents, as well as additional regulations mentioned in this Tip, are available from our Public Resource Center, located on the 20th floor of Seattle Municipal Tower at 700 Fifth Avenue in downtown Seattle, (206) 684-8467.