

# Seattle Permits

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

## Getting a Transitional Encampment Permit from SDCI

Updated March 7, 2024

This Tip is designed to help an organization understand and comply with the City of Seattle land use, zoning, building, and fire code requirements for transitional encampments. Transitional encampments provide temporary quarters for sleeping and shelter. Transitional encampments include tent encampments, tiny house villages (see Note) and safe parking lots for recreational vehicles (RV's). Transitional encampments may have common food preparation, shower or other commonly used facilities separate from the sleeping quarters.

This Tip provides information on:

- The permits that may be required
- How to apply for permits
- Who to contact for permit assistance
- Scheduling inspections
- Additional Resources

**Note:** This Tip applies to tiny homes within encampments. It does not apply to dwelling units proposed under the Seattle Building Code or Seattle Residential Code (i.e. – a tiny home proposed on a Neighborhood Residential lot).

The City of Seattle, in partnership with regional and local partners, is committed to ensuring people living unsheltered in our community have access to the resources they need to end their experience with homelessness. SDCI has a dedicated team to help organizations proposing a transitional encampment meet relevant laws and regulations. SDCI is committed to expediting the permitting and inspections process.

### TRANSITIONAL ENCAMPMENTS PERMITS TYPES

You may need one or more of the following permits.

- **Land Use Permit** - Establishing the use of the property and environmental review of the encampment.
- **Trade Permit** - Governing utility work within property lines of the encampment.
- **SDOT Permit** – Governing work in right-of-way.
- **Construction Permit** - Governing any new or modified buildings, structures or significant site work.
- **Demolition Permit** – Required for complete removal or demolition of a building on site.
- **Food Service Registration or Permit** - Registration or permit may be required from Public Health-Seattle & King County King County Public Health to ensure food safety and for food service on site.

### Land Use Permits for Transitional Encampments

For proposals without religious ownership or control, a land use review is included within a construction permit.

Your proposal may require a separate land use permit for transitional encampments and an environmental review. SDCI uses the square footage of the encampment to determine if environmental review is required under the State Environmental Policy Act (SEPA). Review Tip 208, [State Environmental Policy Act \(SEPA\) Environmental Review in Seattle](#), for more information and contact SDCI for further coaching.

SDCI does not require a land use permit if a religious organization owns the property (SMC 23.42.054). A religious organization includes churches, mosques, synagogues, temples, nondenominational ministries, interdenominational and ecumenical organizations, mission organizations, faith-based social agencies, and other entities whose principal purpose is the study, practice, or advancement of religion (RCW 26.04.007).

[www.seattle.gov/sdci](http://www.seattle.gov/sdci)



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SDCI also does not require a land use permit if the property is controlled but not owned by the religious organization. You must submit both of the following items with your application for a land use permit exemption for religious organizations affiliated with a property.

- “Lease or Rental Agreement between the religious organization and the owner” that gives the religious organization right to use the property, AND
- “Agreement between the encampment operator and the religious organization” that gives the operator right to provide services on the property.

If an encampment is proposed to be in a site mapped with an environmentally critical area (ECA), it may not be allowed ([SMC 23.42.056.B.6](#)). See the “Additional Resources” section at end of this Tip for City of Seattle GIS maps information.

## Trade Permits for Transitional Encampments

Trade permits are always needed for work related to on-site electrical (including electrical within tiny homes), side sewer, mechanical, refrigeration, on-site plumbing and gas piping, water services and street utilities, and electric service connections. See the “Other Information” section at the end of this Tip for resources.

## SDOT Permits for Transitional Encampments

Work in the right-of-way, including alterations (both permanent and temporary) and staging for construction, may require a permit from SDOT. Information for SDOT permits can be referenced on their [Permit and Services webpage](#).

## Construction Permits for Transitional Encampments

You need an SDCI construction permit for the following:

- New buildings and structures
- Repurposing and/or alterations to an existing building for a new occupancy, such as converting storage building to an office – even when there is no significant construction proposed
- New accessory structures (including prefabricated and portable structures) such as community spaces, kitchens, restrooms, bathing facilities, storage facilities, and shading structures
- Moving existing buildings and structures (even if previously permitted) to another site, including prefabricated and portable structures
- Alterations and additions to existing buildings
- Decks and platforms over 18” above grade
- Stairways and ramps
- Adding or replacing hard surface area equal to or greater than 750 square feet including gravel, pavement, buildings, roofs, and other hardscape
- Any land disturbance of 5,000 square feet or more
- Other grading or ground modification activities in an amount that requires a Grading Permit (see the Grading Permit Thresholds in Tip 502, [Grading Regulations and Submittal Requirements in Seattle](#))
- Retaining walls greater than four feet from the top of the wall to the bottom of the footing

You do not need an SDCI construction permit for the following, though a permit may still be required from a separate agency:

- Construction of tiny homes. When located as part of a transitional encampment, SDCI considers wood-framed tiny homes as “wooden tents” and outside the scope of the Residential and Building codes. The size of the tiny home must be less than 120 square feet in projected area (including eaves). The tiny home must be located on a skid without a permanent foundation. Tiny home spacing and setback requirements are set by the Seattle Fire Department, see section “Prepare Your Site Plan” within this Tip.
- Properly labeled commercial coach and modular construction (restrooms, showers, kitchens, etc.). (Regulated by Washington L&I)
- Work in the right-of-way. (Regulated by SDOT)
- Communal soft-sided canopies and/or tents (depending on size, Seattle Fire Department Permit or SDCI construction permit required).
- Portable toilets and/or hand-washing stations that are not connected to utilities
- Ramps or decking 18" or less above grade

Other significant items to know for encampment construction:

- For proposals that do not trigger a construction or Master Use permit requirement per criteria listed

above, the encampment must still meet all code requirements and development standards.

- The State Department of Labor and Industries (L&I) regulates and approves the construction of all factory-assembled structures (i.e. trailers, coaches, homes on wheels) that are sold, leased, or used in Washington state. This includes recreational vehicles (RV's) and tiny homes on wheels. SDCI does not review or inspect RV's or tiny homes on wheels. Review Tip 305, [Factory-Assembled Structures for Residential and Commercial Use](#), for more information and contact SDCI for further coaching.
- SDCI electrical inspections for hookups to trailers cannot be complete and final unless the trailer is approved by L&I and an L&I insignia is present.
- Existing paved surfaces that are undisturbed do not trigger any stormwater management or count toward drainage review thresholds, even when you place tents or tiny homes for transitional encampments on them.

## Demolition Permit for Transitional Encampments

You may need a demolition permit before removing or demolishing any existing building, including prefabricated and portable structures.

## Food Service Registration for Transitional Encampments – Public Health-Seattle & King County

Public Health recognizes that providing safe and healthy food to your community is a priority. Organizations that provide food to others typically need to get a food service permit. However, if your organization provides free food to those in need, you may receive Donated Food Distributing Organization status (DFDO) and be exempt from having to apply for and purchase a food service permit. To determine if you need a food service permit, or to get DFDO status, please contact Public Health at [DFDOinfo@kingcounty.gov](mailto:DFDOinfo@kingcounty.gov) or [thu.bui@kingcounty.gov](mailto:thu.bui@kingcounty.gov). They will guide you through the process and provide resources. Learn more at the [King County DFDO website](#).

## HOW TO APPLY FOR A PERMIT

### Who to Contact for Coaching and Permit Assistance

We highly recommend contacting the SDCI Homeless Response team early in your project. We can provide

preliminary permit coaching and assist in identifying potential Land Use and/or Building Code issues that can affect the feasibility of a project. Contact any member of SDCI's Homeless Response Team to set up a coaching session:

- Emily Lofstedt, [Emily.Lofstedt@seattle.gov](mailto:Emily.Lofstedt@seattle.gov), (206) 386-0097
- Edward Kwitek, [Edward.Kwitek@seattle.gov](mailto:Edward.Kwitek@seattle.gov), (206) 727-3682
- Jessica McHegg, [Jessica.McHegg@seattle.gov](mailto:Jessica.McHegg@seattle.gov), (206) 386-4079

SDCI gives all shelter and encampment permits emergency priority for reviews. You should remain in contact with SDCI's Homeless Response Team throughout your permit process so they can prioritize permit processing and review of your encampment proposal.

## How to get started

### 1. Research your site

Before you apply for your permit, you need to research the proposed encampment site to answer these questions:

- What is the zone?
- Are there any Environmental Critical Areas?
- Will there be any digging or grading?
- Will there be use of any existing structures?
- Will there be any site-built structures?

Contact SDCI's Homeless Response Team if you have questions about your proposed temporary encampment site.

### 2. Prepare Your Site Plan

Prepare a basic site plan meeting the requirements found in Tip 103, [Site Plan Requirements](#).

For encampment projects, you need to include these additional items in your site plan:

- Site information - address, legal description, and parcel number. For encampments proposed on multiple private properties combined as a development site, requirements may be more extensive. Contact SDCI's Homeless Response Team for coaching.
- Property line setbacks – 5'-0" minimum; 10'-0" minimum setback when encampment site abuts residential zone lot.

- Portray all of the encampment on the drawing, including all buildings, structures, tents, and tiny houses separated from each other by no less than 5'-0" (measured from framing face of exterior wall, not finish face).
- Tiny houses shall be numbered starting with one to however many units are to be installed on the site.
- Show common facilities such as bathrooms, laundry, etc. The proposed method of waste discharge from these facilities should be clearly noted.
- Show the location of propane storage. Contact the Seattle Fire Marshal's representative for specific requirements for storage of combustible gas at [SFD\\_FMO\\_Compliance@seattle.gov](mailto:SFD_FMO_Compliance@seattle.gov).
- Show the designated smoking area with no smoking signs throughout the rest of the encampment.
- Include designated bike parking.
- Show any existing or proposed site elements such as stairs, platforms, ramps, retaining walls, gates, fences, trees, and landscaping.
- Show the primary means of entry and exiting throughout the encampment and from the encampment to the public right-of-way.

An example site plan can be referenced at end of this Tip.

### 3. Additional Plan Set Information

You can find general information for creating a complete plan set in the [Construction Permit Checklist for Commercial Projects](#).

For a complete list of Drainage Review thresholds, reference the Seattle Stormwater Manual, Volume 1, Chapter 8. If a drainage review threshold is met or exceeded, then you need a Construction Stormwater Control/Soil Management Plan (CSC/SOIL) and a Drainage and Wastewater Control (DWC) plan. See the SDCI [Stormwater Code webpage](#).

SDCI will review plans and details submitted with a construction permit application for compliance with all construction code requirements. All encampment proposals must demonstrate that accessibility has been provided throughout the site. ([Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act \(ADA\)](#)) Provide plans and details for:

- Accessible routes from site arrival points and parking
- Accessible parking, if parking is provided
- Accessible entries, such as doors, gates, hardware, maneuvering clearances, smooth surfaces, and other requirements to make doors and gates accessible

- Accessible routes within the site, including standard compliant walkways, raised walkways, compliant slopes, and compliant ramps
- Accessible toilets and bathing facilities
- Accessible cooking facilities if provided in a shared space
- Access to all shared facilities, smoking, laundry, and other communal activities

Properties owned by the City of Seattle, such as by Seattle City Light (SCL) or Seattle Department of Transportation (SDOT), that are being repurposed for use as an encampment are subject to further accessibility review to ensure compliance with Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). These additional requirements are reviewed by Seattle's Finance and Administrative Services (FAS). If your proposed property is on City-owned property or in a City-owned building, contact Joy Jacobson at [Joy.Jacobson@seattle.gov](mailto:Joy.Jacobson@seattle.gov) for ADA coaching.

Contact SDCI's Homeless Response Team for coaching on what additional information may be required as part of your plan set based on your project.

### 4. Get a Construction Permit

The preliminary application process is the first step to complete before you can apply for a construction permit. Your permit will be issued after all reviews are approved and permit fees have been paid. See [How Do You Get a Permit](#) for permit process information.

Contact SDCI's Homeless Response Team for questions and assistance during the application process.

## INSPECTIONS

### Construction Inspection

SDCI inspects work per the approved plans and the applicable building codes. As a permit holder, it is your responsibility to call and request each inspection. The final building inspection could be delayed if a required inspection was not scheduled and approved. For example, a final building inspection cannot be scheduled without completing a preconstruction meeting. See [Construction Inspections](#) for more information.

### Fire Inspection

Your encampment must pass an inspection by the Seattle Fire Department before beginning operations and serving the public, even if the encampment does

not require a construction permit. To schedule an inspection from the Seattle Fire Marshal's Office contact at [SFD\\_FMO\\_Compliance@seattle.gov](mailto:SFD_FMO_Compliance@seattle.gov).

Examples of typical SFD inspection items include:

- Minimum two emergency exits from the encampment with gates that open in the direction of egress
- Free travel in direction of egress required on pedestrian exit doors from site
- Exit signs and directional exit signs visible from main pathways
- Exit pathways clear of all obstructions
- Exit paths lighted in hours of darkness
- Map of site must be posted at main entrance in security hut
- Fire extinguishers located every 75'-0" of travel in visible location, not inside of buildings
- Fire extinguishers within food prep and laundry spaces
- Location and distance to nearest fire hydrant
- Smoke and carbon monoxide alarms in all sleeping units
- No charging of electric vehicle batteries in the tiny homes

## Trade Inspection

See the webpages below for information about scheduling trade inspections:

- [Electrical Inspections](#)
- [Mechanical Inspections](#)
- [Side Sewer Inspections](#)

## Housing and Zoning Inspection

SDCI requires a housing and zoning inspection when a construction permit is issued for religious owned or controlled encampments. The housing and zoning inspection must be completed before occupying the village. Reference SDCI's [Inspections website](#) for information on scheduling inspections.

## OTHER INFORMATION

### Code Reference

- DR 9-2016, [Requirements for Transitional Encampments](#)
- [SMC 23.42.054](#), Transitional encampments located on property owned or controlled by a religious organization.
- [SMC 23.42.056](#), Transitional encampment as an interim use.

### Additional Resources

- [City of Seattle GIS maps](#) for locating site information, including environmentally critical areas.
- General information for preparing a plan set can be found in Tip 100, [Getting a Multifamily or Commercial Construction Permit from SDCI](#), under section "Step 5. Prepare Detailed Plans for Submittal."
- Grading information can be found in Tip 502, [Grading Regulations and Submittal Requirements in Seattle](#).
- Side Sewer Permits are issued by SDCI. More information can be found in Tip 503, [Side Sewer Permits in Seattle](#).
- [Electrical permits](#) are required for wiring and service upgrades and are obtained from SDCI through the [Seattle Services Portal](#).
- Water Service (new and changes to existing water services) within Seattle Public Utilities' (SPU's) direct water service area are regulated and approved by SPU. See [Client Assistance Memo \(CAM\) 1202](#).
- [Plumbing and gas piping permits](#) are issued by King County Public Health Department.
- Food service permits and registration issued by King County Public Health Department. See [Donating food and feeding our community safely](#).
- [New and altered electrical service](#) is permitted by Seattle City Light.

## Access to Information

Links to electronic versions of SDCI Tips, Director's Rules, and the Seattle Municipal Code are available on our website at [www.seattle.gov/sdci](http://www.seattle.gov/sdci).



ADDRESS:

PROPERTY LEGAL DESCRIPTION:

PARCEL #:

ZONE:

LAND USE CODE SECTION:

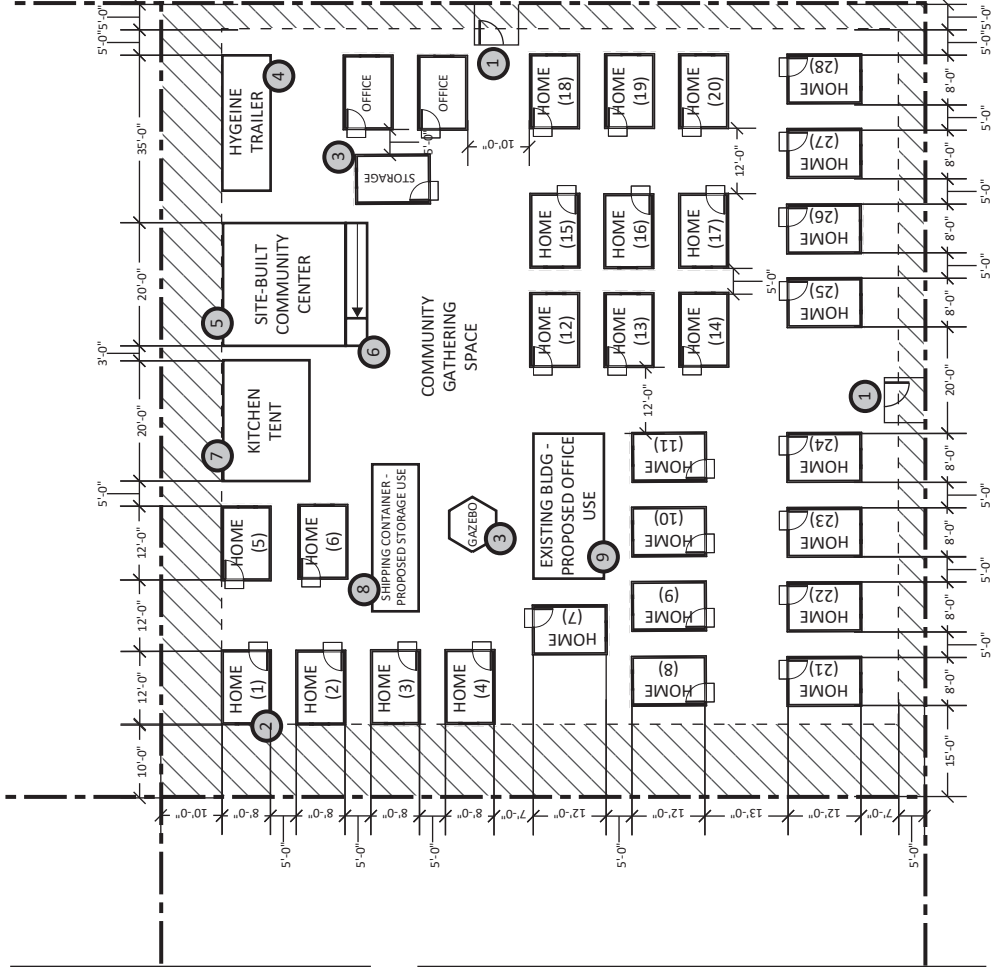
BUILDING CODE EDITION:

LENGTH OF CAMP OPERATION:

OPEN TO OUTSIDE VISITORS (Y/N):

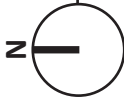
GENERAL FIRE NOTES

- A SITE PLAN UNIT NUMBERING WILL BE POSTED IN THE CHECK-IN OFFICE.
- SMOKE/CO ALARMS WILL BE INSTALLED IN ALL DWELLING UNITS.
- SMOKING AREA WILL BE PROVIDED WITH SMOKING AREA SIGNS AND CIGARETTE RECEPTACLES. MUST BE LOCATED A MINIMUM OF TEN FEET FROM OTHER BUILDINGS.
- (1) 20 LB PROPANE TANK PERMITTED TO BE USED IN THE GRILL AREA, AND (1) ADDITIONAL 20 LB PROPANE TANK PERMITTED TO BE KEPT IN METAL SHIPPING CONTAINER STORAGE UNIT.
- ALL EMERGENCY EXITS WILL HAVE PANIC HARDWARE ON THE INTERIOR AND A KEY-LOCKED HANDLE ON THE EXTERIOR.
- ALL EMERGENCY EXITS WILL HAVE PROPER EXIT SIGNAGE AND DEDICATED FLOOD LIGHTS.
- ALL UNITS WILL HAVE LINE-OF-SIGHT TO EXIT SIGNAGE.
- TYPE AND LOCATION OF FIRE EXTINGUISHERS REQUIRED ON PLAN. WITHIN 75'-0" OF ALL PROPOSED BUILDINGS AND WITHIN FOOD PREP & LAUNDRY SPACES.



R.O.W. NAME

\* RIGHT OF WAY WORK  
UNDER SDOT JURISDICTION



SITE PLAN

SCALE

- MINIMUM (2) EXITS W/ CODE COMPLIANT SEPARATION.  
- SIDE HINGED DOORS/GATES SWINGING IN DIRECTION OF EGRESS.  
- DOORS NOT PERMITTED TO SWING OVER PROPERTY LINE.  
- MAIN ENTRANCE(S) OF THE ENCAMPMENT CONSTRUCTED AND MAINTAINED AS FULLY ACCESSIBLE PER CURRENT CODE; ENFORCED BY SDCI FIELD INSPECTORS.
- TINY HOME.  
- MAXIMUM 120 SF IN PROJECTED AREA (INCLUDING EAVES).  
- DIMENSION FOR SIZE AND LOCATION REQUIRED ON SITE PLAN
- WOODEN ACCESSORY STRUCTURES.  
- SIMILAR SCALE TO TINY HOME.  
- MAXIMUM FLOOR AREA - 120 SF.  
- DIMENSIONS FOR SIZE & LOCATION REQUIRED ON SITE PLAN.
- HYGIENE TRAILER.  
- WAC REQUIRES ANY COMMERCIAL COACH USED IN THE STATE OF WA TO HAVE L&I INSIGNIA.  
- ADDITIONAL INFORMATION NOT REQUIRED FOR PLAN REVIEW.  
- INSPECTION FOR ELECTRICAL HOOKUP CANNOT BE COMPLETED WITHOUT STATE OF WA L&I INSIGNIA.  
- NOTE METHOD OF WASTE DISCHARGE (I.E. - SIDE SEWER CONNECTION, ETC.).
- SITE-BUILT STRUCTURES EXCEEDING 120 SF.  
- PLAN SET MUST BE DEVELOPED TO INCLUDE DRAWINGS SHOWING COMPLIANCE WITH ALL APPLICABLE CODES & STANDARDS (I.E. - ARCHITECTURAL, STRUCTURAL).
- STAIRS, RAMPS & DECKS ABOVE.  
- ARCHITECTURAL & STRUCTURAL DRAWINGS REQUIRED IF MORE THAN 18-INCHES ABOVE GRADE, OR, IF DESIGNED AS A COMPONENT IN THE MEANS OF EGRESS TO R.O.W.  
- COMPLIANCE WITH ALL APPLICABLE CODES & STANDARDS REQUIRED.
- UNENCLOSED FABRIC TENT.  
- NOTE METHOD OF WASTE DISCHARGE IF PLUMBING PROVIDED.  
- ADDITIONAL INFORMATION NOT REQUIRED FOR PLAN REVIEW & INSPECTION.
- SHIPPING CONTAINER.  
- ADDITIONAL INFORMATION MAY BE REQUIRED IN THE PLAN SET PENDING ON USE AND/OR WHAT IS BEING STORED.  
- TIE DOWNS REQUIRED TO ANCHOR THE SHIPPING CONTAINER.  
- SHELVING OVER 5'-9" SHALL HAVE POSITIVE ANCHORAGE TO SHIPPING CONTAINER SIDE WALLS OR FLOORS.
- EXISTING BUILDING ON SITE REPURPOSED FOR SHELTER USE.  
- FOR ALTERATIONS (INCLUDING CHANGE OF USE ONLY), PLAN SET MUST BE DEVELOPED TO INCLUDE DRAWINGS (ARCHITECTURAL, STRUCTURAL) SHOWING COMPLIANCE WITH ALL APPLICABLE CODES & STANDARDS.