

COMMERCIAL PLAN REVIEW FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

How do you schedule a review?

[Online request for Commercial Buildings](#) Plan Review appointments, including fire protection systems. You need to allow pop-ups to use this application. It runs in a separate window. **Note:** This scheduling system does not support the submittal of revisions to existing approved plans. Revisions to previously approved plans require submittal of form [SBD-118](#). Revisions to previously approved plans may be scheduled by completing the form and faxing it to 877-840-9172 or emailing it to DspsSbPlanSchedule@wi.gov. Submitters who drop off unscheduled plans at a review offices will have those plans scheduled to the next available reviewer.

See what the [next available scheduling dates](#) are in the five Industry Services plan review offices.

Who does plan review?

Plans are reviewed by Industry Services Division Commercial Building Plan Reviewers, located in five regional offices. Plans are also reviewed by [delegated agent municipalities](#).

When is review done? Plans must be reviewed prior to beginning of construction. There is an optional "Permission to Start" available, which allows the owner to begin footings and foundation ahead of plan review. Generally, plans for any building construction must be approved prior to review of associated HVAC or fire protection plans.

Where is review done?

Review by Industry Services is done at [five regional offices](#).

What is the timetable for the review process?

By code, plan reviews must be completed within 15 business days of receipt of the application and **all** forms, fee, construction documents, and information required to complete the review. [Check the status of a plan review](#).

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1. **Introduction:** The Wisconsin Commercial Building Code (WCBC) and corresponding laws cover all commercial buildings and structures in the state unless specifically exempted. This includes places of employment, public buildings, and multi-unit (three or more) residential buildings. The WCBC sets minimum health, welfare and safety standards in terms of life safety, fire safety, accessibility, energy conservation, ventilation, heating, sanitary facilities, and structural soundness. See *below for buildings that are exempt from the WCBC.

The WCBC is SPS 360-366, part of the state's Administrative Code - there are many other related codes such as the electrical code, fire prevention code, plumbing code, boiler code, etc. ([See a list of the codes under the authority of the Industry Services Division.](#)) The administrative code has the effect of law. The WCBC adopts most provisions of five of the International Code Council model building codes; there are WCBC provisions that are in addition to or modify ICC codes. The WCBC spells out plan review requirements in SPS 361. Technical provisions for construction are found in the model codes that are adopted and modified in SPS 362-366.

The Industry Services Division of the state Department of Safety and Professional Services administers the WCBC and provides plan reviews, with assistance of some local municipalities which have been delegated authority. For an Internet list of those municipalities and their specific delegations, see [Delegated Municipalities](#). The cities of Milwaukee, Madison and Janesville conduct plan reviews and inspections of projects within their boundaries except for state-owned projects. (In Madison or Janesville, customers have a choice of going to the state or the municipality for plan reviews.) Some other municipalities have been delegated to conduct plan reviews and inspections of new buildings of less than 5,000 square feet area, certain small additions, and alterations of less than 10,000 square feet. The Wisconsin Department of Health Services reviews hospitals and nursing homes. Local approvals and permits are usually necessary for any project, even if Industry Services is doing plan review.

2. **What is the purpose of plan review?** The code requires submission of building, HVAC (heating, ventilating and air-conditioning), and some fire protection plans for review and approval prior to the issuance of local building permits and the commencement of construction to help facilitate compliance with the WCBC.

3. **When must construction plans be submitted to for review?** Plans must be submitted for all new construction, and for alterations or additions to all commercial buildings except those meeting one of the plan exceptions. Plans must be submitted for changes of use, considered under code definitions of occupancies, except for offices, storage buildings, mercantile buildings, greenhouses and storage garages of less than 25,000 cubic feet total volume. This volume plan review exemption does not apply to occupancies such as repair garages, apartment buildings,

schools, daycare centers, theaters, churches, hazardous buildings, or restaurants serving over 100 people.

4. **Does the current edition of the WCBC apply to all plan reviews?** The current edition of the WCBC, effective September 1, 2011, (adopting the 2009 editions of the adopted ICC codes) applies if a building is built, added onto, altered, or when the use of the building changes so that there are different applicable code requirements. For example, a warehouse to apartment building conversion would change code requirements. Examples of alterations bringing the current code into application include those affecting structural strength, fire hazard, and exiting.

With a few exceptions, an existing building not involved in a plan review is maintained according to the code edition under which it was approved.

5. **Is a building's accessibility to people with disabilities dependent on plan review?** No! The federal government has regulations concerning removal of accessibility barriers in existing commercial buildings. While Industry Services does not administer or enforce federal laws, state codes do require various accessibility considerations for a building undergoing construction work, based on federal requirements. For example, depending on the size and use of the buildings, an elevator may be required. Other examples are that some alterations and additions bring accessibility changes to existing sanitary facilities and passageways.

6. What is the owner's responsibility in plan review and construction? The owner is must:

- Obtain plan review approval and local permits prior to the start of construction;
- Hire an architect/engineer when the size or complexity of the building requires the involvement of a professional licensed to practice in Wisconsin;
- Provide Industry Services the name of a supervising professional who will monitor the project;
- Provide accurate information to the designer regarding the intended use of the building and any changes in use;
- Sign the plan approval application form when requesting permission to start a foundation before plan review;
- Assure construction is done in accord with codes and approved plans;
- Correct code non-compliant items noted by inspectors or by the supervising professional;
- Meet requirements of codes administered by other state departments, such as Natural Resources, Health, and Public Instruction;
- Maintain the building per applicable codes.

7. **What is the format of plans to be submitted to Industry Services for review?** The plans must be of sufficient detail to show that requirements of the codes have been met. Industry Services does not accept electronic plan review submittals. Four sets of signed, indexed plans may be submitted, or one set of plans and three signed index sheets. The plans may be for the building, HVAC, and / or structural components (trusses, precast concrete, metal building), either in combination or separately. Plans must be received by 2:00 p.m. two days before the scheduled review.

8. **When must a registered engineer, architect, or building designer be involved?** Wisconsin registered design professionals must be used whenever the total volume of the completed building meets or exceeds 50,000 cubic feet. The design professional must sign and seal each plan page or an indexed cover page listing all the sheets. A registered supervising

professional must also be retained from project start to completion. This may or may not be the same person as the designer. This supervising professional is responsible for on-site observations to help ensure the building is constructed in accordance with the approved plans. At completion of the project, the supervising professional files a "Compliance Statement" with Industry Services certifying the completed building was constructed in substantial agreement with the approved plans. An out-of-state designer not registered in Wisconsin needs to work with a Wisconsin - registered design professional to certify the plans and be the on-site supervising professional.

9. Who pays for plan reviews and inspections? The submitter of the plans pays fees for the cost of plan review. How the money arrangements are made among the owner, designer, submitter, etc. are up to those parties.

10. How does someone determine building volume? Volume is based on the actual cubic space enclosed within the outer surfaces of the building including attics, basements, enclosed porches, and garages. For spaces with a roof, but no enclosing walls, volume is measured to supporting columns or to edge of the roof when the structure is cantilevered without supporting columns.

11. Does Industry Services have records for my existing building? Industry Services retains files for up to three years after an Industry Services plan review, after which they are destroyed. The local municipal building inspection or plan review department, or the State Historical Society, may have building records.

12. How is an Industry Services plan review arranged? To schedule a commercial buildings plan review, the designer or owner makes an Internet request for a review appointment: [Plan Review Scheduler](#). The plans may also be dropped off at or mailed to an Industry Services plan review office, which will cause the plans to be scheduled in the earliest available review opening. Scheduled appointments should be made as far in advance as possible, based on when the plans are expected to be completed and available. The plans may be for the complete building or for phased construction where different parts or HVAC, and / or structural components (trusses, precast concrete, metal building) are submitted, either in combination or separate.

13. What is the advantage of plan review by appointment? Plan review by appointment provides for review at a future date as soon as possible after the plan sets are actually available and allows Industry Services to efficiently assign plan review staff time. Plan review by appointment online gives the requestor an electronic response to the request for review, including a calculation of correct fees. If an appointment is not made, plans sent to an Industry Services office are scheduled in the next available opening, which may be many days from when they are received.

14. What is submitted to Industry Services for a commercial buildings plan review?

- Completed application form SBD-118, with the original signature of the supervising professional (if one is required due to the building size). Providing previous owners' names, previous Industry Services building plan numbers, etc., will avoid delays or confusion in processing;
- Four complete bound sets of plans (see note just below);
- One set of specifications;
- One set of calculations (structural, HVAC, and energy - special note on review of emergency lighting plans and "general" energy efficiency lighting plans);

- Only one set of structural component plans is typically required to be submitted at the time of original or subsequent review, unless the reviewer requires four; and
- Appropriate fees - Fee calculation is provided after online scheduling or computed according to application form, SBD-118.

Note: In lieu of four complete sets of plans, Industry Services accepts submittal of one full set of indexed plans and at least three more signed and sealed index pages. Upon approval the reviewer will stamp the complete set (maintained by Industry Services) and stamp each plan index sheet and return them to the designer with the conditional approval letter detailing the plan review comments. The designer must attach the index sheets bearing the conditional approval stamp to plan sets that are identical to the one complete set submitted to Industry Services. If at some point changes occur, causing a need for submittal of corrected plans, the revised plan and index sheets must be appropriately signed and sealed, with the revision date.

HVAC, [PDF file](#), and Bleachers, [PDF file](#), reminders of commercial plan review submittal information.

15. **What happens during the review process?**

After reviewing the plans, the examiner will take one of three actions:

- "Conditionally Approved" means that the plans substantially conform to the codes, with any exceptions noted in the approval letter. Approval expires one to three years after the date of approval, depending on the type of project. Local considerations and permits are usually relevant to any project, even if Industry Services is doing the plan review.
- "Withheld for Additional Information" means that the plans or calculations are missing significant information or that there appears to be conflicts with the codes that are serious enough that changes to the plans and / or calculations must be submitted to Industry Services. Any revised information submitted must be signed and sealed by a Wisconsin-registered professional, if required for the original submittal.
- "Denied" means that there are serious conflicts with the codes that require the submittal of new plans if the project is to proceed.

Before building occupancy, the supervising professional must submit to Industry Services and the municipality a "Compliance Statement" stating the building was built to the approved plans and code. After occupancy, a local fire inspector will periodically inspect the building to ensure continued code compliance. In general, subsequent changes to state or model codes are not retroactively applied to existing buildings, unless there is additional construction or a change of use.

16. **What is the time frame of the scheduled plan review?** Industry Services's goal is to have the review start within one day of when it is scheduled. The review should be completed within 15 business days of receipt of all required data. Scheduling an appointment and submitting complete plans and calculations are important.

17. **Does someone need to be present for the review?** No, the submitter or their representative is not present at the review. If questions arise during the review, the reviewer will contact the designer by telephone to discuss the items.

18. **Are preliminary plan reviews done by Industry Services staff?** Time and staff considerations do not allow for a general preliminary review prior to submission. Designers may contact the assigned plan reviewer for discussion of a specific code question. If the project has unique features requiring a preliminary determination, the designer may contact the assigned reviewer to consider how to proceed.

19. **What if someone wants to begin construction before the plan review is complete?**

It is possible to start construction before full plan approval via “Permission to Start.”

- a. A Permission to Start only allows construction of footings and foundation (after Industry Services considers the plan submittal documents).
- b. Footing and foundation plans may be submitted separately from the overall project review materials or may be part of that overall submittal. In either case, the Permission to Start does not imply that the footings and foundation are conditionally approved at that time; the owner is proceeding at their own risk. Later correction of code non-compliance may be required.
- c. The owner must complete and sign the appropriate area on the SB-118 form. The form needs to be completed and must be signed by the supervising professional.
- d. The owner may not permit construction above the foundation until the complete building plan review is complete and the conditionally approved plans are at the job site.
- e. An additional fee is required, as noted on the application form.

20. **What if a project seemingly can't comply with the code because of special circumstances?** A designer should discuss the possibilities with Industry Services staff as soon as possible. If code compliance cannot be achieved, the owner has the option to seek approval by justifying equivalency with the intent of the code through the “Petition for Variance” process.

21. **What if someone wishes to preserve the character of a historic building that is being altered?** When the project involves a registered historic building, an owner may elect to use the historic building provisions of the International Existing Building Code, as adopted in SPS 366. The code offers design tradeoff options through a point system.

22. **Are other permits required for a project?** Some of the possible other permits or reviews are noted here, but this list should not be considered complete. State plan review is separate from local permits. Always check with the local municipality and county for their requirements. Circumstances vary for specific projects and localities. (There is no state electrical plan review.) A building may be subject to state plan reviews of:

- Plumbing and private sewage systems under SPS 381-385;
- Elevators or escalators under SPS 318;
- Swimming pools or aquatic centers within a commercial / public facility under SPS 390;
- Tank storage of 5,000 gallons or more of flammable or combustible liquids under SPS 310.

For licensing of hotels, motels, restaurants, pools, campgrounds, and bed and breakfast establishments, contact the state Department of Health Services.

23. **After plans are approved, are there licenses needed do the commercial construction work?** Work done under the Wisconsin building codes requires a contractor’s license. See the [list of credentials](#) to consider which licenses are appropriate.

24. **Do inspections occur when construction starts?** A state and/or local building inspector will conduct periodic inspections for compliance with the commercial building code, looking at the plans and the letter of conditional approval. If the construction is changed from the approved plans, revised plans may be required to be submitted to the state for review. If items are found that are not code compliant, a report is provided to the designer for resolution and reply. If there are outstanding problems at the final inspection, formal orders are sent to the owner requiring corrections.

25. **What are some of the buildings that are exempt from the WCBC?**

- Federally-owned buildings;
- One- and two-family dwellings (newer dwelling construction is covered by the state's

Uniform Dwelling Code, SPS 320-325, which is enforced statewide);

- Buildings located on Indian reservations;
- Daycare centers serving eight or fewer clients when located in a one- or two-family dwelling and Community Based Residential Facilities (CBRFs) serving four or fewer clients;
- Home occupations, other than those involving explosives, fireworks or repair of motor vehicles, that use no more than 25 percent of the habitable area of a one- or two-family dwelling and have no more than one non-family employee.
- Some bed and breakfast inns; and
- Farm buildings (as defined by statute) located on the farm premises.(The WCBC does apply to buildings used for agricultural-related activities involving animals or plant products that are not raised by the farmer, such as horse boarding stables, some farm markets, and commercial grain elevators. The code also applies to horse riding arenas because the activity is public horse-riding, not horse raising.)
- A limited group of buildings of less than 25,000 cubic feet as noted in Table SPS 361.30-1.

--- See SPS 361.02 for a complete list of exempted buildings.