

Remodeling Within the Law

Whether its an addition or an update to the façade of your home, the first step in a remodeling job is to check out local building codes and regulations. Codes and ordinances vary from community to community, and determine exactly where and what you can build, add, or change.

Building Codes

Although fairly standard, these regulations and restrictions on building can vary from town to town. In large-scale projects, the architects and builders create their plans based on knowledge of the local codes. Still, it doesn't hurt for the homeowner to do some research on their own before hiring these professionals.

Bob Mead of Mead Home Improvement, Inc. suggests that the homeowner look into local building codes before paying for drawings or starting work.

"The homeowner should research it upfront to see if it can be done and if it is in their budget," Mead says of additions and remodeling projects.

Information on local codes can be obtained by calling the town office in which the proposed addition or renovation will take place.

In some cases, variances are required for the work to proceed.

A variance is a permit that allows exemption from the rule for your specific situation. Homes need variances when a proposed addition is taller, wider, or has a different use than allowed in the rules.

"Generally this is what holds the job up," Mead says, noting that in some communities the approval process for a variance can take several months.

Obtaining a variance can also cost money in the approval process. Professionals may be required (lawyers, architects) to prove that the variance is necessary.

To approve a variance, most zoning boards need to be assured that your addition is not only necessary, but will not cause a negative impact on the community.

Setback Distances

Setback requirements are rules that determine the number of feet between your building and the property line. These rules are designed to provide adequate space between buildings to provide light, ventilation, access, and privacy.

Setback requirements average between 10 to 15 feet from the side property boundary, and are much longer for the front of the house.

To determine where your boundaries are, you can study the home's survey, or request one from the municipality. Zoning and building officials in your town can provide you with the specific setback requirements for your neighborhood.

Variances are also applicable here, and can be applied for when your addition needs more space than allowed due to setback requirements.

Easements & Deed Restrictions

Easements and deed restrictions may also hamper the construction of an addition. An easement is a legal interest in a parcel of land by someone other than the landowner. An easement allows that person specific limited use.

Sewer pipes and sidewalks owned by the municipality are both common forms of easements. Easements should show up on your survey plat or on a tax map. It is extremely unlikely for an easement to be changed to accommodate an addition, particularly when pipe or electric lines are located underground.

Deed restrictions are conditions placed on the property by former owners. These restrictions may include the preservation of natural resources or limit the type of changes made to the property. Municipalities can also place deed restrictions on new homes, often times using the tool to protect open space and prevent future development.

Historic Sites

Older homes with historic or cultural significance can be affected by local, state and federal regulations. Mead says that regulations in historic districts are intended to preserve the overall look of the neighborhood.

"They don't want anything that isn't in the period the house is built in," he says.

Regulations can determine what type of materials are used, what colors are allowable, and what changes must look like. Before making any changes, make sure to talk with the appropriate local, state, or federal officials to get approval first.