

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS: RESIDENTIAL

1) **What determines how large my house can be and what it can look like?**

Development Criteria and Design Review are both factors that contribute to how large your home can be and what it will ultimately look like.

Development Criteria

The size of your home, including any detached structures, is regulated by floor area ratio, as well as by minimum building setbacks and maximum building height. Additional parking may also be needed. These requirements (development criteria), when applied to the size, shape and slope of your existing lot, will determine the maximum size and configuration of a home on your property.

Design Review

Belmont has a Tiered System of review for the Single Family Design Review (SFDR) process. The level of review (Tier) is dependent on the scope of the project, as provided in the following table.

SFDR Review Thresholds

Tier	Project Characteristics	Review Authority
1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ground floor additions up to 399 sf., cgfa, with top of the addition plate height 12 feet or less, or top of the new roof 18 feet or less, as measured from finished grade. • Enclosure of carports & additions of any size that do not increase the foot print of the home (i.e., underfloor and attic areas that are made habitable). 	Community Development Department (CDD)
2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ground floor additions not consistent with Tier 1. • Ground floor additions from 400 sf to 899 sf. cgfa • Upper floor additions up to 399 sf. cgfa • Combination of upper and lower floor additions up to 899 sf. cgfa 	Zoning Administrator (ZA)
3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New Single Family Homes • Grading more than 500 cubic yards • Disturbance of 6,000 sq. ft. or more of site area • Upper floor additions of 400 sq. ft. cgfa or more • Combination of upper and lower floor additions of 900 sf. cgfa or more • SFDR with other PC level entitlements 	Planning Commission (PC)

2) Do my neighbors need to be noticed about my project?

In many cases your neighbors are required to be notified about your project. Neighborhood outreach and notice is required for the SFDR tiers, as provided in the following table.

Neighborhood Outreach & Notice

Tier	Neighborhood Outreach	Project Notice	Public Hearing
1	Not required	Not required	Not required
2	All projects - required	Notice to Neighboring Property Owners (150 feet)	If requested
3	All projects - required	Public hearing notice per Section 11.4.1 (300 feet)	Required

3) What factors (standards) does the review authority consider to approve the SFDR?

Factors that the review authority looks at when considering a Design Review application include compatibility of architectural design, building bulk, integration of accessory features into project design, grading, landscaping, site layout, and public view obstructions. The review authority also considers conformance with development standards, including Residential Design Criteria (when applicable), and consistency with the City’s adopted Residential Design Guidelines.

4) What is Residential Design Criteria (RDC), and when is it applicable?

Residential Design Criteria (RDC) is a companion document to the Zoning Ordinance, which provides additional, objective, measurable, or quantifiable review criteria required for new construction. The RDC includes relevant criteria for the regulation of building bulk (such as second story step backs, prescribed articulation, and daylight planes), which are specified based upon the scope of the project, site conditions, and the architectural style of the home.

New homes and additions must comply with the Residential Design Criteria if the new construction: (a) includes a ground floor plate height that exceeds 12 feet or a roof height that exceeds 18 feet (as measured from finished grade), or (b) creates or expands an upper floor. The RDC standards are available on the City’s website.

5) What is the Residential Design Guidelines (RDG), and when is it applicable?

All new single-family residential structures, and additions must be consistent with the City’s established Residential Design Guidelines (RDG). The Residential Design Guidelines include basic design concepts and elements of good design. The purpose of the Design Guidelines is to help applicants prepare project plans by: 1) providing an overview of the Single Family Design Review Findings that the review authority must make in order to approve a project; and 2) providing relevant examples of designs that are in general agreement with the Single Family Design Review Findings.

5) How can I obtain the development criteria for my property?

Your development criteria are based upon the Zoning of your property, and are located within the City's Zoning Ordinance. This information can be obtained at the City's Permit Center, or on the City's website at www.belmont.gov. You may visit the Permit Center between 2:00 PM and 4:00 PM, weekdays, or call the center at (650) 595-7422, to obtain this information.

3) What is a floor area ratio?

"Floor Area Ratio" (FAR) is the total "gross" floor area (square feet) of all parts and all levels of all structures, divided by the net lot area. See gross floor area definition below.

4) What does "gross" floor area include?

The sum of all finished and un-finished framed-in floor surfaces with an interior vertical height of six and one-half feet or more from floor to ceiling, which is capable of accommodating living space. Gross floor area is measured from the outside of the exterior walls. Gross Floor area includes garages, utility rooms, and enclosed accessory structures with an interior vertical height of six and one-half feet or more from floor to ceiling. Covered decks, porches, patios, carports, and other covered areas which are not enclosed on all sides are not counted as dwelling floor area. Unfinished floor area existing as of August 23, 2001 cannot be made habitable such that the total habitable floor area exceeds the maximum floor area allowed in the zone, unless a Floor Area Exception is approved.

5) How do I find out what size my lot is?

An approximate lot area may be obtained from your official deed for the property or from the San Mateo County Tax Assessor Office in Redwood City. Permit Center staff could also provide you with a plat map from which your lot area can be calculated. A survey is the most accurate method of determining lot area.

6) What is a building setback?

A "building setback" is a line parallel to a property line which limits how close to the edge of the property a structure can be built. All setbacks are measured inward from all property boundaries. Certain building projections, such as porches, eaves, bay windows, and fireplaces, may be allowed to encroach to a certain degree into required setbacks (see the Permit Center staff or the City's website for a complete list).

7) In order to comply with building setbacks, how do I determine where my property lines are?

A property line is invisible. A street curb or sidewalk edge are usually not the true location of a residential property line. Measuring half the distance of the known right-of-way width of a street from the centerline of that street towards your house can provide the approximate position of your front property line, provided the street is centered within its right-of-way. A so-called "property line fence" is usually very close to the true location of a side or rear property line. You can call the Public Works Department at (650) 595-7476 to find out the

right-of-way width of your street. However, the best way to accurately determine property lines is to hire a licensed surveyor to locate existing benchmark points and measure the boundaries of your property based upon the legal description contained in the official deed.

8) I live on a corner lot. How do I know which is my front lot line and which is my side lot line?

The front lot line is the boundary line which abuts a public street, the front lot line on a corner lot is the narrowest frontage facing a street, and the longest frontage facing a street is the side, irrespective of the direction in which the dwelling faces. The rear lot line is the lot line most nearly parallel to and most remote from the front property line. All other lot lines are side lot lines. An interior lot line is a side line in common with another lot.

9) How do I determine the slope on my lot?

The City uses different slope calculations for developed and undeveloped lots.

Developed Lots - Percent of Slope (Rise/Run)

The percent of slope of developed land is the ratio of the vertical change in grade elevation to the horizontal distance over which that change occurs (expressed as a percentage).

$$PS = SE - FE / HD * 100$$

PS = Percent Slope

SE = Start Elevation in feet

FE = Finish Elevation in feet

HD = Horizontal Distance between SE and FE in feet

For the purpose of this calculation, the longest line within the lot boundaries which lies perpendicular to ground contours must be used. In order to calculate the slope, you will need a topographic map of your property. Permit Center staff may be able to provide a topographic map of your property, which can be used for rough calculations of your lot's slope. A calculation of slope based upon these maps may be accepted as part of the submittal, at the City staff's discretion. However, because these maps are based upon aerial photographs, the City cannot guarantee their accuracy. As such, the City requires that a topographic survey be used for calculations of slope when the proposed project would result in an FAR within 400 sq. ft. of the maximum FAR for the site. Note: on steeper project sites, those with slopes in excess of 18%, it is always advisable to hire a licensed surveyor to calculate slope.

Undeveloped Lots (Average Slope)

The average slope of a vacant lot is calculated by using the following formula:

$$AS = \frac{100 IL}{A}$$

A = Net area of a lot in square feet.

AS = Average percent of slope.

I = Contour interval in feet.

L = Summation of existing contour length in feet.

A topographic survey is required to calculate the average slope of a vacant property. The average slope must be calculated by a surveyor or engineer.

10) Can the City recommend a good architect for my project?

The City does not endorse the services of any particular person or firm, but strongly recommends that you hire a California licensed architect for any building design project, especially one that requires Planning Commission approval. Architects are listed within the yellow pages and on the American Institute of Architects website, which lists architects registered in San Mateo County at <http://www.aiasmc.org/members/>

11) What is a Floor Area Exception?

A Floor Area Exception is a deviation from the Zoning Ordinance regulation for maximum floor area. Exceptions to single family floor area standards may be granted when lot size and site conditions can appropriately support larger homes, or to assist in providing required off-street garage parking.

Floor Area Exceptions are reviewed on a case-by case basis and are not approved unless all of the required findings can be made. Floor Area Exceptions are reviewed and approved by either the Community Development Director or the Planning Commission, depending on the size and scope of the project.

12) What is a Variance? Can I apply for one?

A “Variance” is a deviation from a Zoning Ordinance development standard such as minimum setbacks or maximum height. Belmont Planning Commission approval is required for all Variances. Approval requires the existence of a hardship based upon a unique physical characteristic of the site which prevents full compliance. The hardship cannot be economic or self-imposed, and the amount of deviation allowed will be what is warranted by the hardship. A Variance cannot be obtained to allow a land use not already allowed within a particular zoning district. Certain legal findings, as required under state law, are needed for approval of a Variance.

13) How high of a fence or retaining wall can I have?

Fences, walls or lattice-work screens having a height of not more than six feet above any portion of the adjoining ground level are permitted in all residential districts. However, fences, walls lattice-work screens or any hedges in any front setback area and within 40 feet of a street intersection are not permitted to exceed three and one-half feet in height.

14) I live in a Planned Development (PD) District. What does this mean? What do I need to do to construct an addition on my home within this district?

A Planned Development District is a zoning district assigned to a particular project application and so it is site-specific. It includes a Conceptual Development Plan (i.e., permitted land uses, locations of buildings, and roads, etc.), and a Detailed Development

Plan (building elevations, setbacks, lot coverage, off-street parking, FAR, etc.). Additions to homes within a PD District require an amendment to the DDP, and in some instances a Design Review Permit. The amendment to the DDP is accomplished through the submittal of a Conditional Use Permit (CUP) application. Conditional Use Permit applications for modifications to a DDP are reviewed and approved by either the Community Development Director or the Planning Commission, depending on the size and scope of the project. Please contact the Permit Center for more information and specific submittal requirements.

15) What are the parking standards in a single family residential area for new homes? How many spaces do I need to provide? Do they need to be a certain size or in a certain location?

All new homes require a two-car garage with a minimum interior clearance of 20' x 20', plus two uncovered spaces within the driveway apron with a minimum width of seventeen (17) feet and a minimum length of eighteen (18) feet. The uncovered spaces need to be on the same property as the home (not within the public right-of-way), which requires a minimum 18-foot front setback to the front wall of the garage for driveways that run perpendicular to the street. In addition to the above standards the following should be noted:

- The minimum driveway width at the curb is twelve (12) feet.
- All parking areas including the garage need to be located on the same site as home.
- No parking or paving outside of the required paved driveway and parking surface area is permitted between the front of the dwelling and the front property line (exceptions: 1) a four-foot wide walkway to the front building entrance; and 2) semi-circular driveways may be permitted, provided all of the minimum standards in Section 8.2.8 of the Belmont Zoning Ordinance are met.

16) I would like to build an addition on my home. Do I need to upgrade my parking to current standards?

The current standards require a two-car garage with a minimum interior clearance of 20' x 20'. However, for homes constructed prior to April 2005, a garage with of a minimum interior clearance of 17' x 18' is considered conforming. Current parking standards are listed below:

- New homes must have a total of 4 parking spaces, 2 of which must be in a garage.
- Existing homes with an addition that expands the bedroom count of the principal unit must have the parking spaces specified in the table below:

Home with Addition	Required Parking # = total spaces, (#) = covered spaces
Six bedrooms or more	4 (2)
Five bedrooms	3 (1)
Four bedrooms	3 (1)
Three bedrooms	2 (1)
Accessory Dwelling Unit	No additional parking required
New Home	4 (2)

- Existing homes with one or more garage spaces may not reduce the number of garage spaces to fewer than 2.

- Existing homes with a covered space may use a carport for required covered parking.
- See Section 24 for Accessory Dwelling Unit parking requirements and standards.

17) What is classified as a bedroom?

It should be noted that the City’s definition of a bedroom is quite broad, so as to include rooms of a home that might easily be converted to a bedroom. The current definition is as follows:

“Any fully enclosed room at least seventy square feet or more in area in a residential structure which has heat, ventilation, electricity, a window and a closet may be considered a bedroom. Living rooms, dining rooms, kitchens, dens, bathrooms, or other similar rooms are not considered bedrooms. Bedrooms do not include rooms that are clearly incidental to the other living spaces of the home, such as laundry rooms, rooms that are left open to adjacent living areas of the home, alcoves and breakfast nooks, and rooms accessed solely through bedrooms of the home, such as walk-in closets.”

18) Can parking be in tandem?

Parking may be arranged in a side-by-side or tandem configuration. The minimum parking dimensions are provided in the following table.

Number of Vehicles	Orientation	New Garage	Existing Garage New or Existing Carport Uncovered Parking
1	N/A	10’ x 20’	8.5’ x 18’
2	Side-by-side	20’ x 20’	17’ x 18’
2	Tandem	10’ x 40’	8.5’ x 36’

19) I have trees on my property that I would like to cut down. Do I need some type of permit? Under what circumstance may I remove trees? What if I need to cut them down to add on to my home?

If the tree is a “protected tree,” then yes, you need a permit. The Belmont Tree Ordinance requires a permit to remove protected trees, except when: 1) a city official determines that the tree poses an imminent danger to people or property; 2) a city official determines that the tree is a substantial fire hazard; or 3) the tree is planted, grown and held for sale as part of a licensed nursery business.

A protected tree includes any of the following:

- Principal Native Trees - Coast Live Oak, Valley Oak, Redwood, Madrone, Bay Laurel, or Buckeye having a single main stem or trunk of 10 inches or more DBH, or up to three of the largest secondary stems totaling 10 inches or more DBH.
- City Tree - Any woody, perennial plant, regardless of size, located in a city park, a designated open space, or on any other city property. A single or multi-stemmed shrub

or bush is not a city tree.

- Large Diameter Tree - A woody, perennial plant characterized by having a single main stem or trunk of 14 inches or more DBH, or up to three of the largest secondary stems totaling 18 inches or more DBH.
- Replacement tree - Any tree, regardless of size, which has been planted as required mitigation for the previous removal of another tree at the same site or elsewhere in the city.
- Right-of-Way Tree - A tree located in a public street right-of-way.

The Parks and Recreation Department reviews tree removal applications when a tree is proposed for removal because it is creating an imminent danger to persons and/or real property, or when tree removal is not associated with any planning permit entitlements. For further information, the Parks and Recreation Department may be contacted at (650) 595-7441.

The Community Development Department reviews tree removal applications when reviewing applications for other development entitlements (i.e., Building Permits, Design Reviews, Variances, etc.). A Tree Permit Application is required, and the decision maker may require an Arborist Report or Standard Tree Protection Measures, as appropriate (application materials are available on the City's website). For further information, the Community Development Department may be contacted by telephone at (650) 595-7417 or via electronic mail at cdev@belmont.gov. Staff at the Permit Center are also available to assist applicants Monday-Friday from 2:00PM to 4:00PM.

20) What is considered a detached accessory building? Can I build a detached accessory building on my property? Where can it be located? How large can it be? How tall can it be?

Buildings which are subordinate to, and the use of which is incidental to that of the main building or use on the same lot, are considered accessory buildings. These type of buildings are permitted in all single-family residential districts. There are different standards for detached accessory buildings that are considered non-habitable (i.e., garages, carports, greenhouses, storage buildings, etc.), and detached accessory buildings that are considered habitable (i.e., accessory dwelling units or ADUs).

The standards for ADUs are provided in question 21, below. One-story, non-habitable accessory buildings are permitted in single-family residential districts, subject to the following provisions:

- There is a single-family dwelling on site.
- The accessory building is not in front of the principal dwelling on site.
- The accessory building is no more than fifteen (15) feet in height.
- There is a minimum of five (5) feet between the accessory structure and the main unit on site.
- The additional floor area of the accessory building does not exceed the total floor area permitted for the site (when all structures that contribute to floor area are considered).
- An accessory building on a reversed corner lot does not project beyond the inner line of the front yard required on the adjacent lot to the rear, and is not located less than five

feet from the side lot line of such adjacent lot.

- A detached accessory building on a corner lot is not located less than fifteen feet from side lot line having frontage on a street, and five feet from the interior side lot line.
- The accessory building, does not occupy more than 40 percent required yard areas.

21) What is considered an Accessory Dwelling Unit (ADU) or second unit? Can I have an ADU on my property? What are the standards for ADUs? What is the process for approval?

An Accessory dwelling unit is an attached or a detached residential which provides complete, independent living facilities for one or more persons, located on a lot containing a single-family dwelling as the principal building. It includes permanent provisions for living, sleeping, cooking, eating, and sanitation. An ADU generally takes three forms:

- *Detached:* The unit is separated from the primary structure
- *Attached:* The unit is attached to the primary structure
- *Interior:* The unit is comprised of existing space within the primary residence or an accessory structure (i.e., a guest bedroom is converted into an independent living unit).

Note: An ADU may consist of an efficiency unit, as defined in Section 17958.1 of the State Health and Safety Code (minimum of 150 sq. ft.); or a manufactured home, as defined in Section 18007 of the Health and Safety Code.

Accessory dwelling units are permitted within all single family residential zones and within multi-family residential zones.

ADUs applications meeting ministerial standards can be approved with a building permit. Ministerial standards do not require discretionary review (i.e., Conditional Use Permits and/or Single-family Design Review). The application requirements and standards for ADUs vary by the type of unit. Additional information is provided in the City's [ADU handout](#) on the City's website at www.belmont.gov.

22) How is building height measured?

Maximum building height is measured as the vertical distance from finished grade at each point around the perimeter of the building to the uppermost portion of the roof. Building height is typically shown for each respective cross-slope section of the building.

23) I'm doing an addition on my house, and there is currently no sidewalk along the roadway frontage of my property. Will I be required to construct a sidewalk?

Multiple factors are considered when determining whether to require the construction of sidewalk for development projects. Key considerations include: 1) the type and scope of work for your project; 2) the amount of work proposed along your roadway frontage; and 3) the location of your property relative to schools, parks, employment locations and transit stops.

The Department of Public Works has developed a [Sidewalk Installation Policy](#) that is intended to provide guidance to property owners, as it relates to when sidewalk construction may be required, deferred to a future date, or exempted. For further information, the Public Works Department may be contacted by telephone at (650) 595-7425 or via electronic mail at Pworks@belmont.gov. Public Works staff at the Permit Center are also available to assist applicants Monday-Friday from 2:00PM to 4:00PM.