

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

Updated June 2, 2015

The Seattle Department of Planning and Development (DPD) enforces City shoreline regulations and other laws that regulate use 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 DPD if you are planning to move or change your floating residence.

As part of the 2015 updated Seattle Shoreline Master Program (SSMP), owners of floating residences **must**:

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

DPD determines if a residence over water is a floating home, house barge, floating on-water residence, or vessel with a dwelling unit. This Tip is intended to help owners of a floating residence determine which of these categories applies to their property and what kinds of development are allowed.

IMPORTANT: Be sure to read all four descriptions below in order to determine which category applies to your residence.

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. The number of authorized moorage locations for new floating homes is very limited. Floating homes must be legally established within the City or have a building permit on June 15, 2015.

As required in the SSMP, 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.

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.

A Floating On-Water Residence (FOWR) 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.

As required in the SSMP, 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 a House Barge or as a FOWR. The two residences are subject to the same development regulations.

www.seattle.gov/dpd



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To apply for verification of a FOWR, please see the Floating On-water Residence form included as part of this Tip. To apply for verification of a House Barge, please call the shoreline inspector at (206) 684-5040.

If you have a verified House Barge or FOWR, **you must obtain DPD authorization before you start any exterior repair, remodel, expansion, or rebuilding, including the following:**

- You may add railings around existing exterior spaces and stairs to access these spaces, with some restrictions on the height of the railing.
- You may expand vertically in some cases: The height of the residence is measured from the main deck or 3 feet above the surface of the water, whichever is lower. Usually, you are limited to 18 feet in height. If the current height of the residence is less than 18 feet, you can apply to permit a vertical expansion if the height of the residence after the expansion will be 18 feet or lower. If the current height is more than 18 but less than 21 feet, any rebuild or new vertical development cannot increase the residence's height. If the current height is already at least 21 feet high, any new portion of the FOWR must be 21 feet or lower.
- You may not expand your overwater coverage, except that a one-time expansion at or below the surface of the water may be allowed to provide stability, if a naval architect certifies that the proposed expansion is the minimum necessary to provide stability for the structural size and configuration that existed before July 1, 1990 (house barge) or before July 1, 2014 (FOWR). The area of the expansion cannot be used for any purpose other than to provide stability.
- If the total expansion over the life of the residence exceeds 120 square feet, you will be required to use gray water containment or a waste-water hookup that disposes the gray water to the City's waste-water disposal system.
- You can replace your residence to the same size and configuration that existed at the time of the verification.

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, you must verify the vessel with the City and obtain and display the City-issued identification plate.

To apply for verification, please see the Vessel with a Dwelling Unit form included as part of this Tip.

A VDU must be designed to be used for water transportation. If a VDU is used for residential purposes it must be 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 structure on the water lacking any of these features does not qualify as a VDU and may not be used as a residence. However, having these features alone does not mean that the vessel is designed for navigation; an expert must make that determination.

Uses on vessels must be consistent with the SSMP, even if no shoreline substantial development permit is required.

If you have a Vessel Containing a Dwelling Unit that is required to be verified under 23.60A.214.D, **you must obtain DPD authorization prior to starting any exterior repair, remodel, expansion, or rebuilding.**

- Any repair, remodel, expansion, or rebuilding must maintain the VDU as a vessel as defined by the City.
- You can maintain, repair, remodel, or alter the VDU within the vessel's existing envelope, including height, width, depth, and overwater coverage as all existed on **June 15, 2015**, with one exception: you can also add railings up to 36 inches in height around exterior spaces and stairs to access these spaces.
- You can rebuild your VDU if it is destroyed by fire, act of nature, or other causes beyond the control of the owner if you act towards rebuilding the VDU within 12 months after destruction. Normal deterioration of vessels constructed in or over the water is not included in this rebuild provision. The VDU must be rebuilt to the same or smaller configuration that existed immediately before the destruction.

Questions?

If you have a question about residential uses permitted over water in Seattle, please contact the shoreline inspector on DPD's Code Compliance staff at (206) 684-5040.

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

Access to Information

Links to electronic versions of DPD **Tips**, **Director's Rules**, and the **Seattle Municipal Code** are available on the "Tools & Resources" page of our website at www.seattle.gov/dpd. 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.

What form should I send in?

Must have been used as a residence within the City AND was moored at a recreational marina within the City:

Remodeling allowed with permits per Shoreline code?



Form to send in:

Other information:

N/A	A floating home is connected to the City's municipal sewer line and is located within a tax parcel.	The Floating Home Registration Form was sent to the taxpayer address that the City has on file, and should be received by August 2015.	Yes
Before July 1, 1990.	House barges are not on a tax parcel and usually are not connected to the municipal sewer line.	The House Barge Verification Form was sent directly to the taxpayer and should be received by July 2015.	Yes
On or after July 1, 1990, but before July 1, 2014.	FOWRs are not on a tax parcel and usually are not connected to the municipal sewer line.	Floating on-water Residence Form	Yes, regulations are more lenient than for VDU
On or after July 1, 2014, but before June 15, 2015.	In addition to the moorage requirement, a VDU must also demonstrate that it is designed and used for navigation.	Vessel with a Dwelling Unit Form	Yes, regulations are stricter than for FOWR
N/A	Must meet very specific vessel descriptions -- see SMC 23.60A.214.	No form - does not need to be recorded with the City	N/A