House to Commercial

Guidelines for converting a house to a commercial business

General Information

Can a single detached dwelling be converted for commercial purposes?

Yes. A single detached dwelling can be converted for commercial purposes if it is located in a zone that allows for commercial development, A development permit and a building permit will be required to ensure conformance to the zoning bylaw and National Building Code of Canada (NBC). Certain uses may require discretionary use approval, even within commercial zoning.

What site development upgrades may be required?

Site upgrades may include:

- Asphalt or concrete surfacing for required or voluntary parking and loading areas.
- Servicing or lead line replacement.

What if the building is not located on land that is already zoned commercial?

If the land is not zoned commercial, a zoning bylaw amendment application is required before the development permit and building permit can be issued. It is best to discuss your plans with the City through a Service Request early in your project planning.

Who can determine if it is feasible to convert a building for commercial purposes?

Applicants are advised to retain the services of an architect, engineer, or other qualified person. They can determine the suitability of a building with respect to requirements contained in NBC and to prepare the necessary drawings to show how these requirements will be met.

How does Heritage status affect a conversion?

When renovating a building with heritage status, there are many important considerations such as understanding your house's heritage significance, financial incentives and permit approvals. It is best to discuss your plans with the City through a Service Request early in your project planning.

What renovations might be required by the NBC?

Housing conversions can require a very significant number of changes and investment which may include:

- Accessibility standards
- Structural suitability for commercial use
- Fire-rated floor assemblies
- Suite and exit fire separations
- Number and location of exits
- Sufficient headroom, handrails and guardrails
- Dimensions of stair risers, treads and landings
- Spatial separations to property lines and/or other buildings on the same property
- A fire alarm and detection system
- Emergency lighting
- Mechanical ventilation and exhaust systems
- Plumbing systems

Why must all these requirements be applied to a simple conversion from a house to commercial use?

A house was originally constructed for residential use and not for commercial purposes. Commercial buildings are used by the general public and employees, so the degree of barrier-free access, structural protection, and life safety provisions must be higher than in residential buildings.

How can the City help make projects more affordable?

To help make projects more affordable, the City of Regina has invested in research and analysis to develop approved code-compliant alternatives that owners and designers can use when converting existing single detached dwellings to commercial spaces. If your project does not fit the parameters of our alternatives, other options may be required, such as a site-specific alternative solution from a design professional.

The alternatives provided in this document will not be suitable for all projects. In that case, a site-specific alternative solution from a design professional may be an option.

Financial Incentives

Depending on the specific details of your project, the City may have incentives available.

Please visit our Heritage and Revitalization incentive pages find our more information on our current incentives.

Pre-Application Meeting Support

Pre-application meetings provide the opportunity for designers, project managers and building owners to meet with the City to discuss questions specific to an upcoming project. These meetings are intended to support the development of productive working relationships, improve the quality of applications, and improve the efficiency of plan reviews while remaining within the parameters of Saskatchewan's legislation.

Visit our Pre-Application Meeting webpage for more information.

Typical Barriers & Accepted Alternatives

Background & First Steps

It is strongly recommended to speak with a design professional who is knowledgeable of housing conversions before purchasing a property or planning a conversion. The City has knowledgeable staff to help you understand the conversion process and are available to discuss permit approval processes through a Service Request.

Successful house conversions start with collaboration between business owners, designers and the City. As part of the City's commitment to our community and to make projects more affordable, we have invested in research and analysis to develop approved code compliant alternatives. The accepted alternatives in this document are a high-level summary. Designers working through their analysis should review the detailed report commissioned by the City of Regina. The alternatives identify and reduce typical barriers with a house to commercial conversion and are broadly based off analysis from:

- Article 1.1.1.2., Division A British Columbia Building Code (BCBC).
- User's Guide: NBC 1995: Application of Part 9 to Existing Buildings - NRC Publications Archive - Canada.ca. Focusing on occupant life safety and structural fire protection over property protection.
- User's Guide: NBC 1995: Fire Protection, Occupant Safety and Accessibility (Part 3) - NRC Publications Archive - Canada.ca.

Minimum Required Upgrades

This list of required upgrades is not inclusive of all required changes, but are all mandatory for using any of the City approved alternatives.

- Emergency lighting
- Smoke alarms, hardwired and interconnected
- Fire extinguishers complaint with NFPA 10
- One operation release door hardware

Business Operation Limitations

The accepted alternatives were designed for building uses that meet all the following:

- 30 occupants or fewer (including staff and customers)
- Assembly (A2), Personal Service (Group D) or Mercantile (Group E) Occupancies
- No childcare facilities or sleeping accommodation
- Single tenant building

Assembly Occupancies

Assembly occupancies (Group A2), such as cafes and yoga studios, are typically designed to Part 3. Based on Article 3.1.2.6 of the BCBC, Assembly Occupancies will be accepted as Business and Personal Services (Group D) as long as they are not childcare facilities and have a maximum occupant load of 30 people.

Barrier Free Accessibility

Due to building size, *The Building Code Regulations of Saskatchewan* do not require the building to be accessible. The City encourages owners to make positive changes to their building where practical.

To promote more accessible spaces, the City will accept a single universal washroom to support the same number of occupants as two non-accessible washrooms.

Basements

Basements require at least one fire-rated exit. If the existing basement will only be used for service equipment and very limited private storage, clear signage indicating that the floor space will not be occupied may be installed in lieu of a rated exit. Basements should still be separated from the main floor, treating the space as a non-conforming crawlspace.

Commercial Cooking

Commercial cooking equipment that is used for processes that cause grease laden vapours will require kitchen ventilation in accordance with NFPA96. A mechanical engineer will be required to provide analysis and drawings.

Doors

New exit doors should swing outward. Existing inswing doors can remain.

Eave Projections

Although not permitted within 1.2 metres of a property line, combustible projections may remain as long as they are protected in accordance with Clause 9.10.14.(8).(b).

If the existing roof ventilation is through a perforated soffit, measures may be necessary to vent the roof a different way and it may be easier to protect or eliminate windows below the combustible projection. Other projections such as canopies and balconies should be reviewed and conditions where projections on adjacent buildings essentially connect the buildings should be removed.

Energy Efficiency

The Building Code Regulations do not require buildings which were permitted prior to January 1, 2019 to meet energy standards.

Exits

Article 9.9.4 7 provides prescriptive guidelines to allow for an open stair between the main and second floors. In addition, these changes may be accepted:

- This Article may be extended to Assembly occupancies with less than 30 people.
- The required 45-minute rating of the basement floor may be substituted for an existing rating with a lower value than required, such as drywall or plaster. New drywall installed should be Type X or C to achieve the required rating.
- If a rated exit is provided from the main floor to the second floor, a separate open stair may be permitted between the main floor and basement.

Fire Alarms

The intent in using smoke alarms is to alert occupants to a fire elsewhere in the building, in particular, in a storey below them. Alarms should be located at the top and bottom of stairs, in hallways serving multiple rooms, in rooms with doors that are normally closed such as storage, mechanical and janitor rooms, and in attics, basements, and crawlspaces.

Exterior Wall Construction

Assembly and Personal Service Occupancies

If a wall is required to have a fire resistance rating or be noncombustible the following can be accepted:

- Combustible framing members may remain
- Combustible cladding may remain
- Existing fire resistance ratings with a lower value than required, such as drywall or plaster, can be accepted. New drywall installed should be Type X or C to achieve the required rating.
- Openings are permitted with the exception of when in proximity to a specific element that would facilitate fire spread from one building to another such as balconies, canopies, or other combustible projections that make a connection between two buildings.

Mercantile Occupancies

Due to higher fire load, mercantile occupancies where a wall is required to have a fire resistance rating or be noncombustible the following can be accepted:

- Combustible framing members may remain
- Combustible cladding may remain if no glazing or unprotected openings
- Existing fire resistance ratings with a lower value than required, such as drywall or plaster, can be accepted if an additional layer of Type X or C drywall is added.

Where alterations to Group A2, D or E buildings include changes to interior finishes or exterior cladding, the new materials should comply with the current requirements. This includes alterations made after the change of major occupancy.

Floor Assemblies

Floors are required to have a fire resistance rating. Existing rating with a lower value than required, such as drywall or plaster, can be considered when existing floor systems contain dimensional lumber. If new drywall is installed, it should be Type X or C to achieve the required rating.

Future Voluntary Changes

After approved, the building will have components and systems non-conforming to the commercial building code, due to the accepted variations. Future voluntary changes to nonconforming components should be made code compliant where practical to do so. Items such as Type X drywall, door swing direction and cladding material should be thoughtfully chosen when replaced.

Handrails & Guardrails

Existing nonconforming handrails and guardrails may be accepted to remain based on general risk of the location and variance from required dimensions but typically require improvements. Incremental improvements should be made to reduce risk of injury where practical to do so but understand guards may need particular review when in conflict with heritage value.

Headroom

Headroom clearance can be very difficult and costly to achieve in existing buildings. A headroom height of 1980mm may be accepted based on location and measures to mitigate risk of injury.

Mechanical Equipment
Mechanical plans sealed by an engineer will be required for equipment changes. If no changes are required to the heating and ventilations systems, a confirmation letter from a mechanical engineer can be an accepted alternative.

Mechanical Penetrations
Code compliant penetrations include fire dampers, smoke dampers and fire stop systems where applicable. Tightly fitting drywall or existing plaster with intumescent calking or tightly adhered mineral wool will be accepted if smoke detectors have been installed within rooms that are in proximity to the penetrations.

Stairs, Risers & Landings
Existing nonconforming stairs, risers and landings may be accepted to remain based on general risk of the location and variance from required dimensions. Incremental improvements should be made to reduce risk of injury such as increased lighting, marking of nosings, mitigating points of low headroom or sharp edges, and new handrails.

Servicing
Typical services for houses do not have the capacity for commercial business or meet the Regina Design Standards. The City of Regina minimum water service size for commercial is 50 mm. However, the building operation of many house conversions continue to use similar capacity of water and can function with the existing residential service. In those cases, applicants can request a design standard exception to use the existing service rather than upsizing.

If the existing waterline is lead, it must be replaced as part of the house conversion. More information can be found on the Lead Service Connection webpage.

Sprinklers
Although not required, the addition of a sprinkler system makes such a significant improvement to occupant safety and property protection including exposures, that it can be used to address any deficiency. NFPA 13D is specifically intended to provide a cost-efficient means of sprinklering houses to prevent loss of life (occupant safety) and can reasonably be used in other small buildings through a site-specific alternative solution.

Structural Fire protection
Fire rated assemblies are required for structural fire protection. Existing ratings with a lower value than required, such as drywall or plaster, may be accepted when constructed with dimensional lumber. New drywall installed should be Type X or C to achieve the required rating.

As a precaution, signage should be posted near the building entry, preferably the white lettering on red background typical in signage related to fire protection, advising responding firefighters that the building has reduced fire resistance rating at its floors.

Structural Systems
Commercial uses require higher floor loading requirements than single family homes, including stairs, decks and balconies. A structural engineer will be required to review the existing structure and either provide confirmation that the building meets Article 9.9.4.1 loading criteria or provide sealed drawings which detail required upgrades.

Third Storeys

Third storeys require the building to have a second exit, a rated roof and a fire alarm system. If the existing third storey will only be used for service equipment and very limited private storage, clear signage indicating that the floor space will not be occupied can be installed in lieu of:

- An exit from the third storey,
- A second exit throughout the building and;
- A fire alarm system.

Third storeys should still be separated from the second floor, treating the space as a non-conforming service space.

Vertical Spaces

Vertical spaces such as chimneys, shafts, and laundry chutes that are not in use should be closed. Ideally at each floor level, however, at the top and bottom may be acceptable where they cannot be accessed at each floor level.

Washroom Capacity

Buildings with more than 10 total occupants typically require a second washroom (staff and customers). The City will accept a single universal washroom or existing washroom to support 30 occupants but suggest an additional washroom where practical.

For more information on about any of the accepted alternatives or about building permits, zoning or servicing, please visit Regina.ca or contact Service Regina.