

At the Department of Buildings, we're excited to help you get your new business up and running in Chicago. From scouting locations to opening day, here are a few tips to keep in mind:

Research The Property

Before you sign a lease or purchase a property, it's important to make sure it will be suitable for your business.

You can use the city's online zoning map (chicago.gov/zoningmap) to determine the zoning district and any historic designations. The zoning district will determine whether certain activities are allowed "by right," will require special approval, or are prohibited without a zoning change. A historic designation may limit your ability to make certain changes to the building, especially on the exterior.

You can also research the history of building permits, inspections, and violations by address (chicago.gov/buildingrecords). These records can help you determine if work has been done without proper permits or inspections, or if there are open violations.

You may want to have an architect, engineer, or experienced contractor evaluate the property and estimate remodeling costs.

Determine If Your New Business Will Need a Building Permit

A building permit is required for all construction or demolition and most renovation or repair work. If you are changing the type of business operating in the space (a "change of use"), a building permit may be required to confirm that there are appropriate safety features and exits, even if no construction is required. For more extensive remodeling and any change of use, you will need a plan-based building permit. For some smaller projects, including many projects to renovate an existing business, you may be eligible to use the Express Permit Program. In most cases, drawings prepared by a licensed architect or engineer will be required as part of your building permit application.

Visit our Guide to Building Permits (chicago.gov/permit) to learn more about building permit requirements and processes.

Department of Buildings Inspections

Based on the type of business that you are opening and the amount of construction required, you will need to pass several types of building inspections before opening. If a building permit is required for construction or a change of use, make sure to schedule all required building-permit-related inspections online (chicago.gov/buildings) before scheduling your business license inspections. The list below includes some of the most common building inspection items that may be required for your new business:

Architectural/Construction

- Have a drawing ("floor plan") of the entire space occupied by your business on site. The plan should show the location of walls, doors, and furniture. Important dimensions should be labeled. In some cases, this plan must be drawn by an architect or engineer.
- Required exits (doors and stairs) may not be locked or blocked when the business is open. Door hardware must be operational. Doors from larger spaces must swing in the direction of exiting. Panic hardware (push bars) is also required for larger spaces.
- For larger spaces, a maximum capacity sign (chicago.gov/maximumcapacity) is required. This sign must be displayed in a prominent location. In some cases, you may also be required to display a diagram showing the location of exits.
- Floors, ceilings, and walls must be in good condition, without visible damage or deterioration.
- Exterior walls and walkways must be in good condition, without holes or large cracks.
- Required fire safety equipment (fire extinguishers, smoke and CO detectors, sprinklers, etc.) must be present and operable.

Electrical

- Exposed or unprotected electrical wiring is not allowed, including the overuse of power strips or extension cords.
- All electrical boxes, switches, and outlets must have undamaged plates or covers.
- Light bulbs must be protected inside a light fixture.
- Illuminated exit signs are required over exit doors and along exit routes.
- Emergency lighting is required for many types of businesses and must be the correct type (System I, II or III).

Plumbing

- Plumbing pipes and fixtures must be installed to prevent contamination of drinking water (cross-connection and backflow).
- Plumbing fixtures must be installed ("trapped" and "vented") to prevent sewer gas from backing up into the building.
- Hot water heaters must be installed properly.
- Employees and customers must have access to plumbing facilities. Requirements are based on the type and size of the space.

Ventilation/HVAC

- Adequate ventilation and exhaust must be provided, based on the types of activities occurring in the space.
- Exhaust must be designed and operated to avoid creating nuisance conditions for neighbors.

Note: License inspections are scheduled directly through BACP. Please coordinate with your BACP Business Consultant.

These tips are provided as a public service for informational and educational purposes only. These tips are only a summary and do not include all conditions, limitations, or exceptions that may be applicable to a particular situation. There may be additional licensing, zoning, building, or inspection requirements based on the nature of your business.