

Signs

Your signage and the exterior appearance of your business can play an important role in your success. The fastest way to get your signs and exterior modifications (awnings, paint color changes, etc.) approved is to check in first with Planning Department staff at (707) 938-3681. Staff can explain when approval by the Design Review & Historic Preservation Commission (DRHPC) is required and provide the necessary application forms. Some types of signs can be approved over the counter, but it is to your benefit to hire a design or signage professional to assist you.



For more information, please refer to the brochure on “**Information About Business Signage & Outdoor Displays in the City of Sonoma**”.

Large Projects

If your business plans involve a major remodel, expansion, or new construction, you can request (or staff may suggest) a meeting with the Project Advisory Committee. This is an inter-departmental committee with City staff to provide early-stage input on development projects at no charge. It can prove extremely valuable in giving you and your architect or project manager a sense of the process, any studies that may be required (traffic, drainage, etc.), timelines, and potential issues associated with your project. Staff can also assist with identifying the agencies and departments that can provide you with an estimate of their respective fees for your project.

Information about **business licenses, home occupation permits, fictitious business names, seller's permits**, and resources for your business (including a video start-up guide), can be found at www.SonomaChamber.org

We look forward to working with you to bring your business to our community.



Contacts

City of Sonoma

City Hall, #1 The Plaza, Sonoma 95476
(707) 938-3681 phone; (707) 938-8775 fax
www.sonomacity.org

Sonoma Valley Chamber of Commerce

651 Broadway, Sonoma 95476
(707) 996-1033
www.SonomaChamber.org

Sonoma County Health Services Department

(707) 565-6565 phone; (707) 565-6525 fax
www.sonoma-county.org/health

Sonoma County Water Agency

(707) 547-1900

Sonoma County PRMD, Sanitation Division

(707) 565-1900

Guide to Starting a Business in the City of Sonoma



We're glad you are considering a Sonoma location for your business. Through our Economic & Business Development Services we can connect you with resources to help you get started. Learn more at www.SonomaChamber.org

The process for getting your business up and running with all the required permits and approvals can vary in length, depending on factors such as your type of business, the location you have chosen, and the tenant improvements you plan to make. Before you sign a lease or announce an opening date, we encourage you to review this brochure and check in with staff at City Hall.



As soon as you find a potential location for your business, we recommend that you speak with staff from both the City of Sonoma Planning Department and the Building Department. Call (707) 938-3681 or stop by the first floor counter at City Hall from 8 a.m. - noon or 1 p.m. – 5 p.m. Staff there also works closely with other City departments and other agencies, so they can be very helpful in identifying requirements that may be applicable for your business.

Zoning

Planning Department staff will be able to confirm whether your location is within the city limits and determine if your planned use and location comply with zoning regulations. They can give you guidance about any reviews or permits that may be needed. If you find out that the zoning for your location does not allow the kind of business you wish to open, the Economic & Business Development Services may be able to suggest other locations where your business would be allowed or encouraged.

Certain kinds of businesses may require a conditional use permit (CUP). Planning staff will outline the process. CUP applications are reviewed by the Planning Commission, a seven-member body appointed by the City Council that meets monthly. If your CUP is granted, it will include conditions of approval which you will be required to follow. In some instances, it may be necessary to apply for a variance from a specific zoning standard, such as the number of parking spaces required.

If any kind of approval or permit is needed in order to comply with the Zoning Ordinance, be sure to make the lease or purchase of property for your business contingent upon these approvals. Ask City staff what information they will need from you, the approximate fees you can expect, and the estimated timeline. Based on their experience, staff may also be able to give insights about likely issues or concerns with your application.

Building Permits

Before you lease space or begin any remodeling, talk to the Building Department staff at City Hall about your plans. This is especially important if you plan to do any renovation to a building or change its use. Building permits are typically required for any structural, nonstructural, electrical, plumbing or mechanical work, whether inside or outside of your building. Although some items do not require a building permit, it is better to find out before you sign a lease. Also, it is wise to not assume that just because your predecessor used the same building for a similar use that you can do the same without a new permit or improvements to the property.

Sometimes the improvements you are planning will trigger other code requirements, such as fire sprinklers or state energy-efficiency requirements. Almost all improvements requiring a building permit will trigger state requirements for disabled access. In most cases, buildings which do not meet accessibility requirements for entrances and exits, restrooms, parking, etc. must be upgraded prior to opening your business, and this is something you may want to discuss with the building owner.



When considering improvements that require a building permit, we recommend that business owners work with an architect to help expedite the permit approval process and a licensed contractor to do the actual improvement work.

Encroachment Permits

If you will be performing work on the public right-of-way (i.e. city sidewalk, curb, or public street), or performing work that blocks any portion of the public right-of-way, a City encroachment permit must first be obtained at City Hall. Insurance requirements apply.

Other Permits and Approvals

If you plan to sell or handle food or beverages, a permit from the Sonoma County Health Services Department may be required. The County Health Department enforces state regulations pertaining to food handling establishments. Contact them at (707) 527-1888. Note that California law prohibits the sale of food prepared at home.

Just because a facility previously has been used to prepare or sell food does not mean that the Health Department will let you use the same facilities without making any changes or upgrades. Each new operator must apply for a license. You may want to ask the Health Department to see their files on the facility to be aware of any past problems or violations.

Depending on your type of business, additional water or sewer fees may apply. Staff at the front counter at City Hall can provide information about water fees. Check with the County Permit and Resource Management Department (PRMD), Sanitation Division, at (707) 565-1900 to determine what sewer fees apply to your business, since businesses that increase sewage discharge from what is currently calculated may need to pay additional fees.

Check in with the Sonoma County Water Agency at (707) 547-1900 to determine if a grease trap, grease interceptor, or sand interceptor is required for your business. These are typically required for businesses that may discharge grease or sand into the public sewer systems, such as businesses that cook food, or car washes.

Alcohol sales require special permitting. First check with Planning staff at City Hall to determine if the zoning for your site allows alcohol sales. They can provide you with the contact information at the State Alcohol Beverage Control Board (ABC) to apply for your license.