



# Converting Attics, Basements and Garages to Living Space **9**



**CITY OF PORTLAND, OREGON - BUREAU OF DEVELOPMENT SERVICES**  
1900 SW 4th Avenue, Portland, Oregon 97201 • 503-823-7300 • www.portlandoregon.gov/bds

## Livable space or accessory dwelling unit

This publication provides information for homeowners who want to increase livable space in their single family homes by converting an attic, basement or garage or legalize existing space that was converted without permits. It is important to know that most existing basements, attics and garages were built to be used for storage rather than living space; therefore, each conversion project is unique. The conditions of your site and dwelling will determine the scope and feasibility of the project. This brochure includes alternative standards for existing conditions as approved by the Building Official and available in the Habitable Space Standards for Existing Elements Code Guide located at [www.portlandoregon.gov/BDS/article/68635](http://www.portlandoregon.gov/BDS/article/68635).

Requirements for Accessory Dwelling Units (ADUs) are different from simply converting a space to additional living space. For information on adding ADUs or in-law quarters to your home, go to [www.portlandoregon.gov/bds/36676](http://www.portlandoregon.gov/bds/36676).

Converting basements and garages to habitable space may be prohibited if your home is located within the floodplain. Please contact Site Development at 503-823-6892 for additional information.



## Permit requirements

<b>Building permit</b>	Is required to convert attics, basements or garages to living space
<b>Electrical, Mechanical and Plumbing permits</b>	May also be required, depending on the scope of the work
<b>Permit Fees</b>	Building permit fees are calculated based on the value of the project. Fees for electrical, mechanical and plumbing permits are based on the specific work being done. Fees are printed on the applications.

## Evaluating your existing space

In unfinished areas, existing features such as the strength of the existing home, ceiling heights, windows, stairs and insulation may not meet current building code requirements for living space. These conditions could make it expensive, difficult or impractical for you to change your attic, basement or garage into living space. In addition, zoning code requirements may affect your project.

### Zoning Code

- **Setbacks:** Conversion of some existing garages within the side or rear setbacks may be allowed with limits on size and height. Check with Planning and Zoning before conversion.
- **Parking:** To convert your garage to living space, you may need to provide a required onsite parking space. Your existing driveway may not meet this requirement.
- **Roof height:** If converting attic space to living space involves raising the roof, height regulations may affect your project.
- **Exterior changes:** Depending on the Zoning designation of your property, additional review may be needed if you want to alter the exterior of your home and garage.

### Building Code

- **Firewall:** If any exterior wall is less than three feet from a property line, a fire-rated wall without openings will be required.
- **Structure:** Existing attic floor and supporting structure below would need to be evaluated to verify the adequacy of the existing framing to support live loads (such as weight of people, furniture, etc.) and structurally improved to meet current code if found deficient.
- **Dormers:** Adding a new dormer or enlarging an existing dormer may trigger structural improvements to the existing structure for the purpose of resisting wind or earthquake load and for floor live loads.
- **Basements:** If you are finishing a basement and the house is not currently bolted to the foundation, consider voluntary seismic strengthening while the floor framing and basement walls are exposed. See the Residential Seismic Strengthening brochure at [www.portlandoregon.gov/bds/article/334429](http://www.portlandoregon.gov/bds/article/334429).

## Summary of Building Code Standards

These standards apply only to conversions that would increase livable space for the existing dwelling, not those that would add a dwelling unit.

### Minimum room area and ceiling height

- **Floor area and sloped ceilings:** Living space must have at least 70 square feet of floor area. Utility and storage rooms, closets, bathrooms or kitchens may be any size. In living space with sloped ceilings, no more than one half of the minimum required floor area may have a sloped ceiling less than 6'8" in height with no part of the required floor area less than five feet in height.
- **Ceiling height:** Where the ceiling is flat, living space may have a ceiling as low as 6'8". Beams, heating ducts, pipes, etc. are allowed as low as six feet from the floor if they are within two feet of a wall, or as low as 6'2" where they do not take up more than 10% of the floor area in the room where they are located. No projections below 6'8" may be within 3' of a door into the room.
- **Sloped bathroom ceilings:** In bathrooms with sloped ceilings, not more than 75 percent of the floor area is permitted to have a ceiling height less than 6'8", provided an area of 21 inches deep by 24 inches wide in front of toilets and lavatories has a minimum height of 6'4", measured from the finished floor. An area of 24 inches by 30 inches both in front of and inside of a tub or shower shall have a minimum height of 6'4", measured from the standing surface of the fixture.

### Stairs

**Existing stairways:** An existing stairway leading to new living space may be steeper, narrower and have lower headroom than the current code allows:

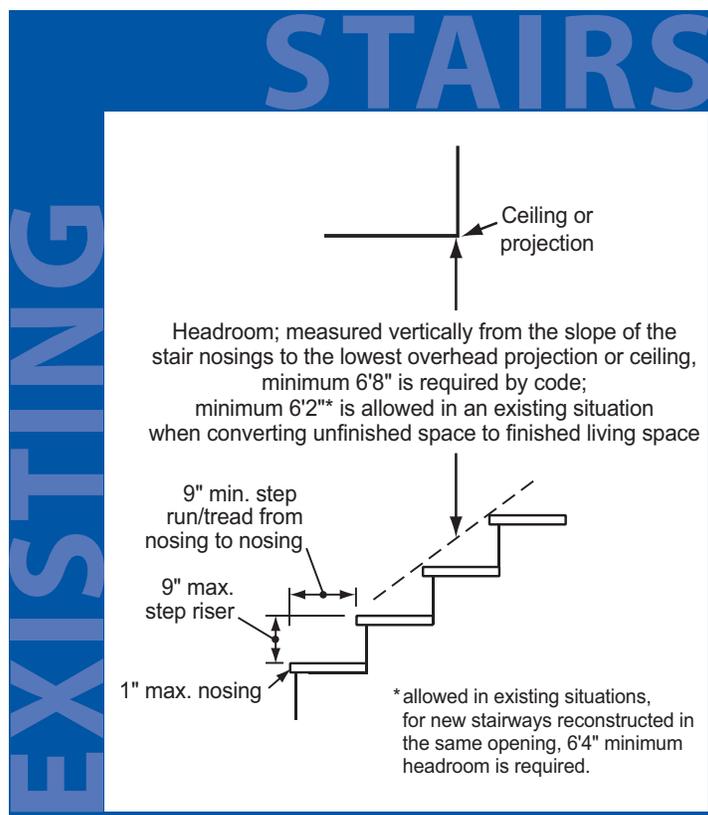
- **Rise and run:** The stairway must have treads (runs) no smaller than nine inches and risers no higher than nine inches. The steps should be relatively even with the largest difference between the biggest and the smallest rise or run not more than a three-eighths inch.
- **Width:** Must be at least 30 inches.
- **Headroom:** Must be at least 6'2" measured vertically from the slope of the stair nosings to the lowest overhead projection or ceiling.
- **Landings:** Are required at the top and bottom of stairs. The landing's length and width must be at least 30" wide and 30" long and have at least 6'2" headroom.
- **Doorways:** Are allowed at the top of stairs as long as the door does not swing over the stairs. A door may not obstruct the landing at the bottom of the stairs.
- **Existing winder stairs:** which are triangular in shape, are allowed. New winder stairs must meet current code.

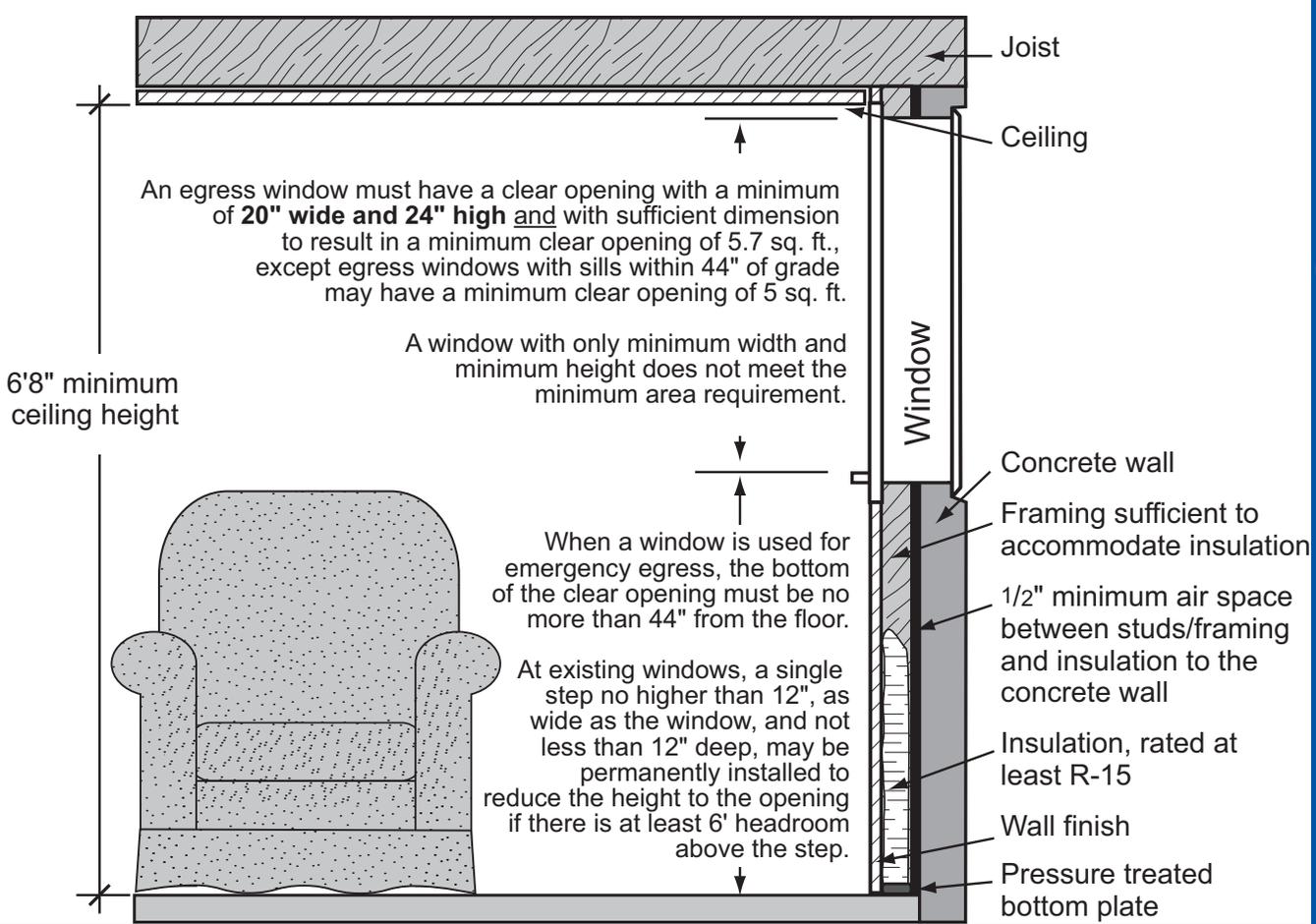
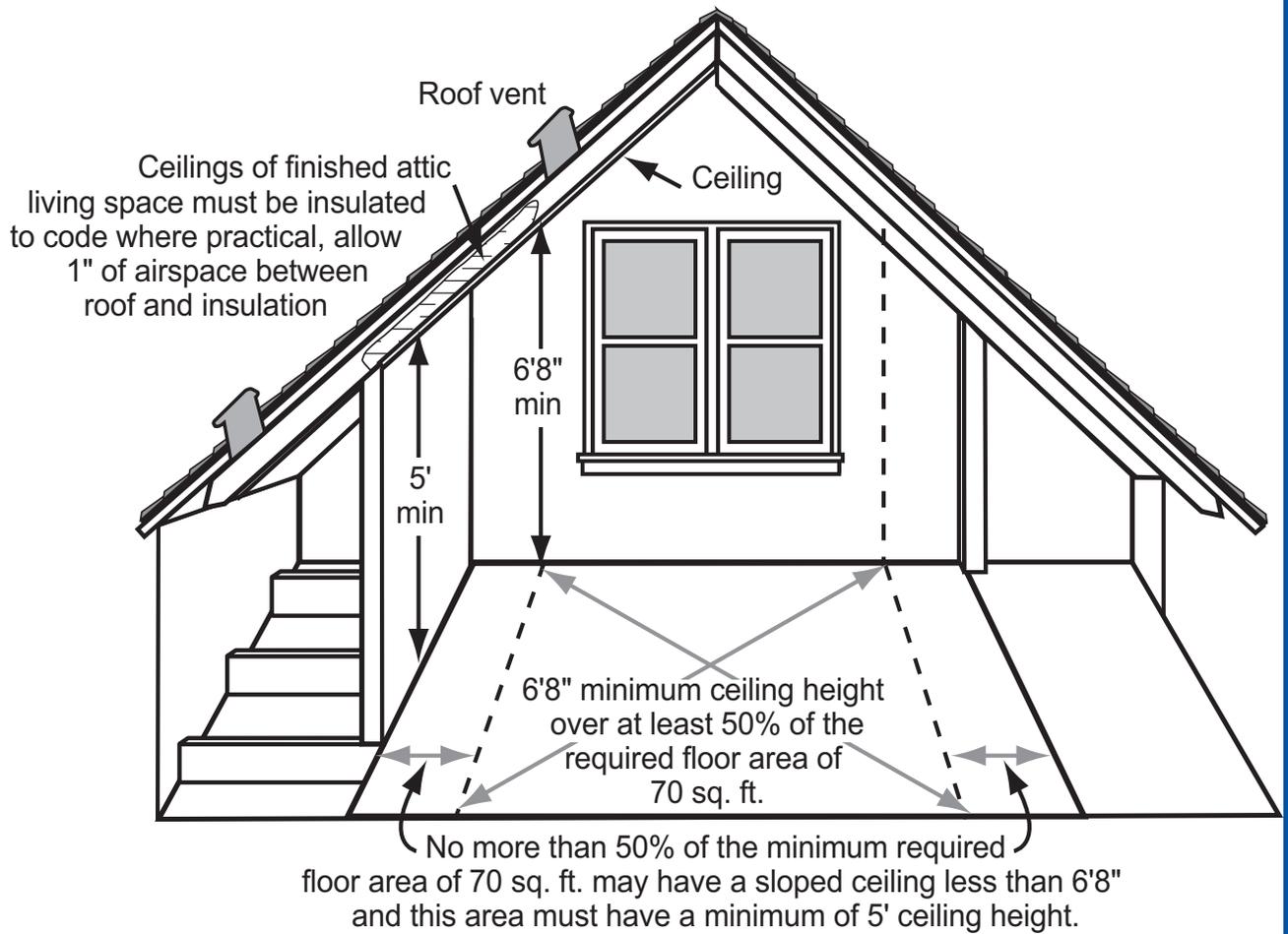
**Rebuilt stairways:** stairs reconstructed in the same opening can be a minimum of 30" wide, have a maximum riser height of 9" and a minimum of 6' 4" headroom. All other criteria for a stair must meet current code requirements. See the Stairs Brochure ([www.portlandoregon.gov/bds/article/93024](http://www.portlandoregon.gov/bds/article/93024)) for these standards.

**Existing Noncompliant stairs:** Where an existing stair cannot be made to comply and another compliant means of egress is provided, the noncompliant stair shall either be rebuilt or walled off.

## Doors and emergency escape and rescue openings (egress windows)

- **Door size:** The clear opening of a door that leads into a converted attic, basement or garage must be at least 6'2" high and 30 inches wide. Exterior doors used for emergency escape and rescue must be at least the same size.
- **All sleeping rooms:** must have at least one egress window or exterior door for escape or rescue in case of an emergency.
- **Egress window size:** An egress window must have a clear opening with a minimum width of at least 20 inches and a minimum height of at least 24 inches and with a sufficient dimension to result in a minimum clear opening of 5.7 square feet in area, except egress windows with sills within 44" of grade may have a minimum clear opening of 5 square feet. NOTE: A window with only minimum width and minimum height does not meet the minimum area requirement.
- **Sill height:** The bottom of the egress window's clear opening may not be more than 44 inches above the floor. A single step, not less than 12 inches deep, no higher than 12 inches, and at least as wide as the window opening, may be permanently installed under an existing window to reduce the height to the bottom of the clear opening to 44 inches or less, provided there is at least six feet clear from the top of the step to the ceiling.
- **Exterior egress door:** In basements, an exterior door at least 6 feet 2 inches high and at least 30 inches wide, may be used to meet emergency egress requirements with no limit to the bottom of the clear opening height as long as the door is along a compliant stair, and is located at least one step below the level of the floor above.





## Insulation and ventilation

- **Additions** that increase the floor area of the house must be insulated as if they were new construction.
- **New windows or doors** must meet current code requirements for energy conservation. Double glazed windows or storm windows placed over existing single glazed windows will be approved.
- **Exposed framing** must be insulated if finishes are removed from the exterior walls or roof. R-15 insulation is allowed between existing two-by-four studs or rafters. If the attic areas can be accessed without removing the finishes, they too must be insulated to the maximum extent possible to meet current code.
- **Existing concrete exterior walls** must be furred out with framing sufficient to accommodate the required insulation. Any wood in contact with concrete must be pressure treated wood.
- **New construction affecting basement walls** requires that the basement walls be insulated to R-15. Existing insulation in basement walls that is R-11 or greater will be approved.
- **Attic and garage ceilings** must be insulated to current code. When ceiling height is a problem, R-15 insulation with one inch airspace between the insulation and roof deck will be approved in spaces between existing two-by-four rafters. Roof ventilation is required to meet current code where insulation is added.
- **Minor dormer additions**, as defined within the Minor Additions and Dormers brochure ([www.portlandoregon.gov/bds/article/365961](http://www.portlandoregon.gov/bds/article/365961)), may be constructed and insulated to match existing conditions.
- **New wood floor joists** that are installed over an existing concrete floor require that insulation be provided in the joist space with a vapor barrier below.
- **Combustion air requirements** must be verified for all fuel burning appliances when areas containing furnaces and water heaters are finished or made smaller.
- **Habitable rooms must have natural ventilation** provided by windows or doors to the outdoors with openings of at least 2.5 percent of the floor areas being vented, unless outdoor air is provided by a mechanical system.
- **Habitable rooms must have light** provided either by windows or doors to the outdoors with openings with a glass area of at least 6.8 percent of the room's floor areas, or permanently installed electrical lighting.
- **Additional Energy Measures** are required for conversions that are greater than 30 percent of the existing building heated floor area or more than 400 square feet in area, whichever is less. One additional measure must be selected from Table N1101.3 of the Oregon Residential Specialty Code (see [www.portlandoregon.gov/bds/article/213933](http://www.portlandoregon.gov/bds/article/213933), Section C).

## Flood Hazard Areas

Converting basements to habitable space in the Flood Hazard Area **may be** prohibited. Please contact Site Development at 503-823-6892 to discuss your project.

## Helpful Information

### Bureau of Development Services (BDS)

City of Portland, Oregon  
1900 SW 4th Avenue, Portland, OR 97201  
[www.portlandoregon.gov/bds](http://www.portlandoregon.gov/bds)

### General Office Hours:

Monday through Friday, 8:00 am to 5:00 pm  
BDS main number: 503-823-7300

### Permit Information is available at the following location:

Development Services Center (First Floor)  
For Hours Call 503-823-7310  
or visit [www.portlandoregon.gov/bds](http://www.portlandoregon.gov/bds)

Permitting Services (Second Floor)

For Hours Call 503-823-7310

or visit [www.portlandoregon.gov/bds](http://www.portlandoregon.gov/bds)

## Important Telephone Numbers

DSC automated information line .....	503-823-7310
Building code information .....	503-823-1456
Planning and Zoning information .....	503-823-7526
Permit information for electrical, mechanical, plumbing, sewer and sign.....	503-823-7363
Permitting process and fee information .....	503-823-7357
Permit resources and records.....	503-823-7660
BDS 24-hour inspection request line requires IVR number and three digit type of inspection code .....	503-823-7000
Residential inspectors information for one and two family dwellings.....	503-823-7388
City of Portland TTY .....	503-823-6868
Tree Hotline .....	503-823-8733

## Scheduling an inspection

Call 503-823-7000, the BDS 24 hour inspection request line

Enter your IVR or permit number

Enter the three-digit inspection code for the type of inspection you are requesting

Enter a phone number where you can be reached during weekdays and if you want the inspection in the morning or afternoon

There must be an adult over age 18 to let the inspector inside

**For more detailed information regarding the bureau's hours of operation and available services;**

Visit us online at  
[www.portlandoregon.gov/bds](http://www.portlandoregon.gov/bds)

**Note:** All information in this brochure is subject to change.