



# WHEN DOES A RETAINING WALL NEED A PERMIT?

**Important:** The Building & Safety Division and the Planning Division have separate requirements for the approval of retaining walls. These requirements apply to the Building & Safety Division only. Please visit our retaining wall FAQ page for more information at [www.rpvca.gov/buildingFAQ](http://www.rpvca.gov/buildingFAQ). All applicants must first inquire about the proposed project with the Planning Division at 310-544-5287 or via email at [planning@rpvca.gov](mailto:planning@rpvca.gov).

**This handout is to clarify when a building permit is required for the construction of a retaining wall. This handout ONLY applies to Building and Safety Division requirements; not Planning Division requirements. Grading that is exempt from Building and Safety Division may still require Planning Division review.**

## DEFINITIONS:

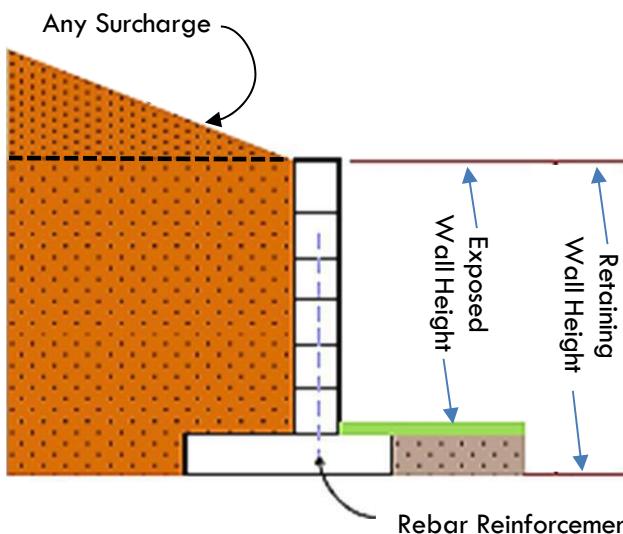
**Retaining Wall:** A wall designed to resist earth and/or fluid pressure, including any surcharge in accordance with acceptable engineering practices.

**Surcharge:** The vertical load imposed on retained soil that may impose a lateral force in addition to lateral earth pressure of retained soil. The Surcharge from soil above the top of the wall adds additional pressure. Nearby roads, buildings, or structures such as pools can add a surcharge. Example: Sloping retained soil; structure footings supported by the retained soil; or adjacent vehicle loads supported by retained soil.

**Retaining Wall Height:** The vertical distance measured from the bottom of the footing to the finish grade at the top of the wall (i.e. upper grade), per 2025 California Building Code Sec. 105.2 Building - item 4. That is, combined total of the height of the wall and the depth of the footing below grade.

**Exposed Wall Height:** The vertical distance measured from the finish grade at the bottom of the wall (i.e. lower soil grade) to the foundation grade at the top of the wall (i.e. upper soil grade). The height does not include the wall depth of footing below grade.

## WHEN IS A PERMIT REQUIRED?



- The total wall height is greater than 4 feet measured from the bottom of the footing to the top of the retaining wall.
- Any retaining wall in excess of 30 inches (2.5 feet) in height as measured from the bottom of the footing to the top of the wall that is constructed on or within 10 feet of a slope that has a grade of 5:1 (20%) or steeper.

### **Geology Site Visit & Soils Reports:**

A geology site visit is required for all proposed retaining walls that **REQUIRE** a building permit. The purpose of the site visit is to determine whether the preparation and approval of a soils report is necessary in conjunction with the building permit. The cost of the site visit is \$486.00. If a soils report is determined to be required, an additional review fee of \$1,799.00 will be required upon submittal of the soils report for review/approval. A preliminary site plan illustrating the approximate location and heights of the proposed retaining walls shall be provided at the time the site visit is scheduled. For more information, please visit [www.rpvca.gov/geology](http://www.rpvca.gov/geology)

### **Drainage:**

Provisions shall be made to relieve hydrostatic pressure via sub-drains behind the wall with installation of a 4-inch perforated drain line and a 12-inch gravel pocket. Weep holes or solid outlet piles are required to remove water from the wall area. Water is not permitted to drain onto adjoining properties or walkways. A separate Encroachment Permit will be required for work in the public right-of-way with the Public Works Department (310-544-5252 or [publicworks@rpvca.gov](mailto:publicworks@rpvca.gov))

### **Site Plan:**

If a permit is required, the applicant shall provide a fully dimensioned site plan, drawn to scale, showing the lot size, street, alley, easements, parking, walls, projections, and building locations. All project elements shall be delineated including the distances to property lines and adjacent structures. In addition, the general site topography with slope, drainage patterns, and current discharge location(s) shall be shown on the site plan. The plan must clearly show the location and dimensions of the proposed new wall(s) and provide Top of Wall (TW), Finish Grade (FG) and Top of Footing (TF) notations for each wall, at any change in construction grade, and at intervals of 2 feet where changes in height of the retaining condition(s) will exist.

## **A permit is NOT required for retaining walls which:**

- Do not exceed 4 feet in height as measured from the bottom of the footing to the top of the wall. (When retaining wall is not within 10 feet of a slope over 20%)
- Do not exceed 30-inches in height as measured from the bottom of the footing to the top of the wall. (When retaining wall is within 10 feet of a slope over 20%)

