

Permitting and Inspection Process for Disaster-Resilient Residential Homes

This Fact Sheet informs homeowners or their designated representatives—such as a contractor—about the permitting and inspection process, which helps protect the homes, lands, and natural resources of the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI). By completing these steps and responsibilities as described, your home will be more resilient to natural disasters.

The Importance of Residential Construction Permits and Inspections

Residential construction permits provide value to homeowners through a review process that offers many benefits:

- Ensures compliance with the law
- Offers help and advice from trained officials who serve your community
- Identifies common construction errors
- Provides early and continued involvement of officials to answer questions and help avoid expensive mistakes
- Ensures your project receives the oversight that can save time and money
- Helps you build or rebuild a home that is resilient to natural disasters
- Protects you, your family and other occupants



Steps and Benefits of Obtaining All Necessary Approvals

Whether you hire a building contractor or plan to do the work yourself, residential construction permit applications must be submitted to three agencies in the CNMI:

- **Commonwealth Zoning Board & Saipan Zoning Office** – for land use standards
- **Bureau of Environmental & Coastal Quality** – for environmental protection
- **Building Safety Code Division in the Department of Public Works** – for building standards

These agencies provide oversight and review for residential construction approvals. The steps below briefly describe the process of coordinating with these agencies for residential construction permits and inspections in the repair or new construction of a home. A graphic at the end of this document shows a summary of the steps in the permitting process, as well as agency contact information. Refer to the Useful Links section for permitting application forms and guidance.



STEP 1. SUBMIT AN APPLICATION TO THE COMMONWEALTH ZONING BOARD & SAIPAN ZONING OFFICE FOR A ZONING PERMIT.

The Commonwealth Zoning Board and Saipan Zoning Office help homeowners understand the land use and zoning regulations that must be followed during the Zoning Permit process. They can work closely with homeowners as they consider the best way to develop property that will add to the community's economic, environmental, and social well-being, while preserving natural and historical resources. For instance, personnel with the Saipan Zoning Office will inform homeowners of the building setback requirements from the road and from property lines. In some instances, this can allow the property owner to build closer to the road, creating additional land to plant crops and vegetables for subsistence farming.¹ For properties on islands other than Saipan, the Division of Coastal Resources Management regulations control setback and parking requirements. Abiding by these regulations improves your home's resistance to fire and avoids utility maintenance issues. It helps keep your home out of harm's way.



STEP 2. SUBMIT AN APPLICATION TO THE BUREAU OF ENVIRONMENTAL & COASTAL QUALITY FOR A ONE-START EARTHMOVING PERMIT AND, IF NECESSARY, FOR A MINOR DEVELOPMENT PERMIT.

The Bureau of Environmental & Coastal Quality (BECQ) includes two divisions: the Division of Environmental Quality (DEQ) and the Division of Coastal Resources Management (DCRM).

These divisions seek to serve the public through wise management of CNMI natural resources.

By submitting an application to BECQ for a One-Start Earthmoving Permit, a homeowner is provided with an expedited process that supports additional review from the Historic Preservation Office and the Division of Fish and Wildlife. These agencies will be able to comment on the permit, as necessary, in an effort to protect historical and wildlife resources.

¹ Commonwealth Zoning Board & Saipan Zoning Office, FY 2019 Citizen Centric Report, <https://opd.gov.mp/wp-content/uploads/opd/2019-Commonwealth-Zoning-Board-Office-Citizen-Centric-Report.pdf>

Note that projects located within an Area of Particular Concern require a Minor Development Permit from DCRM. Areas of Particular Concern have unique and important environmental properties, such as shorelines, lagoons and reefs, wetlands, commercial ports, and coastal flood hazard zones. The Minor Development Permit will describe the methods being used to avoid or mitigate environmental impacts. Larger projects may require a Major Siting Permit or permit amendment. Permitting requirements can be verified in pre-application meetings with BECQ or will be confirmed through the One-Start process.



STEP 3. SUBMIT AN APPLICATION TO THE BUILDING SAFETY CODE DIVISION FOR A BUILDING PERMIT

The Building Safety Code Division (BSCD) in the Department of Public Works promotes health, safety, and general welfare for the people of the CNMI through professional services in plan review and inspection. This division is dedicated to upholding CNMI Public Law No. 21-14 to ensure that buildings meet the minimum safety requirements of the International Residential Code®. It also enforces the CNMI's floodplain management regulations to minimize flood damage in accordance with CNMI Public Law No. 8-7.

The building safety official can assist homeowners as they prepare and submit an application for a Building Permit to ensure the design conforms with the building code and offers a high level of protection. This is especially important since all areas of the CNMI are in a high-wind region, which comes with the added danger of wind-borne debris impacts. Build correctly and safely to help your home withstand storms and other hazards. Homeowners can get a Building Permit application at their local BSCD office.



STEP 4. BUILDING SAFETY CODE DIVISION COORDINATES FOR CONSTRUCTION INSPECTIONS

After submitting the Building Permit application and receiving BSCD approval, the home construction can begin. The BSCD will coordinate with the homeowner to establish inspections during the construction process as a way of monitoring for code compliance. Homeowners and their contractors must ensure the construction matches the plans approved by the BSCD.



STEP 5. BUILDING SAFETY CODE DIVISION ISSUES APPROVAL FOR A CERTIFICATE OF OCCUPANCY

After all approvals have been obtained, the building safety official will provide a Certificate of Occupancy, which acknowledges the home has been built in accordance with the laws and codes of the CNMI. This completes the home construction process and the home can be occupied as approved.

Responsibilities of Homeowners and the Building Safety Code Division

The CNMI BSCD serves an important role in residential permitting and inspection (see Figure 1). Homeowners, or their designated representatives, and building safety officials will interact at multiple steps during the permitting and inspection process. It benefits both the homeowner and the community for these interactions to be straightforward and properly coordinated. This section explains the responsibilities of both parties involved in achieving the successful completion of new and repaired homes.



Figure 1. This photo shows a home damaged by Super Typhoon Yutu in October 2018. Strong winds blew a large portion of the roof off. The permitting and inspection process can make a home more resistant to this and other building failures. Follow this process to help protect you, your family, and your home from natural disasters.

Homeowner Responsibilities

Submit all necessary building permit documents to the BSCD.

The BSCD is dedicated to improving building construction and promoting greater safety for citizens and residents of the CNMI. Consider the building safety official an ally who has the duty to review your documents to make your project a success. In accordance with the CNMI Administrative Code, it is unlawful to construct, enlarge, or alter a private building without first filing an application with the BSCD. Failure to comply with this law may result in fines, project delays, and unsafe construction.

Coordinate with professionals who can assist in the planning and construction of your home.

A CNMI-licensed professional engineer or architect can help prepare building drawings and specifications. Homeowners are required to have a registered CNMI design professional place his or her seal and signature on the drawings and calculations related to structural, mechanical, and electrical work. The design professional also is your advocate. The design professional's recommendations can go beyond code requirements to make your home more resilient to natural disasters. The homeowner, or his or her designated representative, such as a contractor, must submit two sets of building drawings (plans) to the building safety official as part of the Building Permit package.

Building Safety Code Division Responsibilities

Review Building Permit applications for approval.

The BSCD plan reviewer confirms that the drawings comply with the adopted Commonwealth Building Safety Code. The CNMI currently enforces the 2018 International Building Code®. This code has specific requirements to protect homes and occupants from natural hazards such as typhoons, floods, earthquakes, and fires. The Floodplain Administrator, as part of the BSCD, has the duty to review the building plans so that homes are constructed using methods and practices that minimize flood damage. This official can help homeowners understand their flood risk. The official also can explain how to follow or exceed local requirements that help protect lives and property from flood risks. When the BSCD completes the plan review process and comments have been resolved, it provides the homeowner with a Building Permit. The Building Permit gives the homeowner authorization to begin constructing the home after all other necessary permits have been obtained.

Inspect home construction and issue Certificates of Occupancy.

During construction, the BSCD inspector visits the construction site periodically. The inspector reviews the work being performed to make sure it conforms with the permit and approved plans. In the process, the inspector can help homeowners and contractors with construction questions, which can minimize potentially expensive mistakes. Upon completion of the construction and inspection process, with all testing requirements being passed, the BSCD issues a Certificate of Occupancy to the homeowner. This final approval offers the homeowner peace of mind that the home complies with the construction and safety standards of the CNMI (see Figure 2, below).



Figure 2. By following the CNMI planning, permitting, and construction processes, this home was built with disaster-resilient features in accordance with the Commonwealth Building Safety Code.

Conclusion

Your home is one of your greatest investments and knowing that it is built to withstand damage from typhoons and other natural hazards can offer peace of mind and financial security. Adherence to the CNMI permitting and construction process benefits not only your home investment, but also the sustainability and resilience of your community and the CNMI.

Resources

International Code Council. 2017. *2018 International Residential Code*®.

https://codes.iccsafe.org/content/IRC2018?site_type=public

CNMI Law. 2017. Chapter 155-10 Building Safety Division.

<https://cnmilaw.org/pdf/admincode/T155/T155-10.pdf>

Useful Links

Bureau of Environmental & Coastal Quality. 2021. Applications.

<http://deq.gov.mp/sec.asp?secID=2>

Bureau of Environmental & Coastal Quality. 2021. BECQ Public Permitting App.

https://dcrm.gov.mp/wp-content/uploads/crm/Public-web-app-infographic_AdobeEdit_Nov2017.pdf

Bureau of Environmental & Coastal Quality. 2021 One Start Non-Commercial Application.

ONE-START Application for Non-Commercial update2019.pdf (gov.mp)

CNMI Zoning Board & Saipan Zoning Office. 2021. Residential Development: To Build a New House.

<https://cnmizoning.com/sec.asp?secID=14>

CNMI Zoning Board & Saipan Zoning Office. 2021. Single Family Home Zoning Permit Application.

https://cnmizoning.com/resources/files/Applications/Residential_SingleFamilyHome.pdf

Division of Coastal Resources Management. 2021. Permitting.

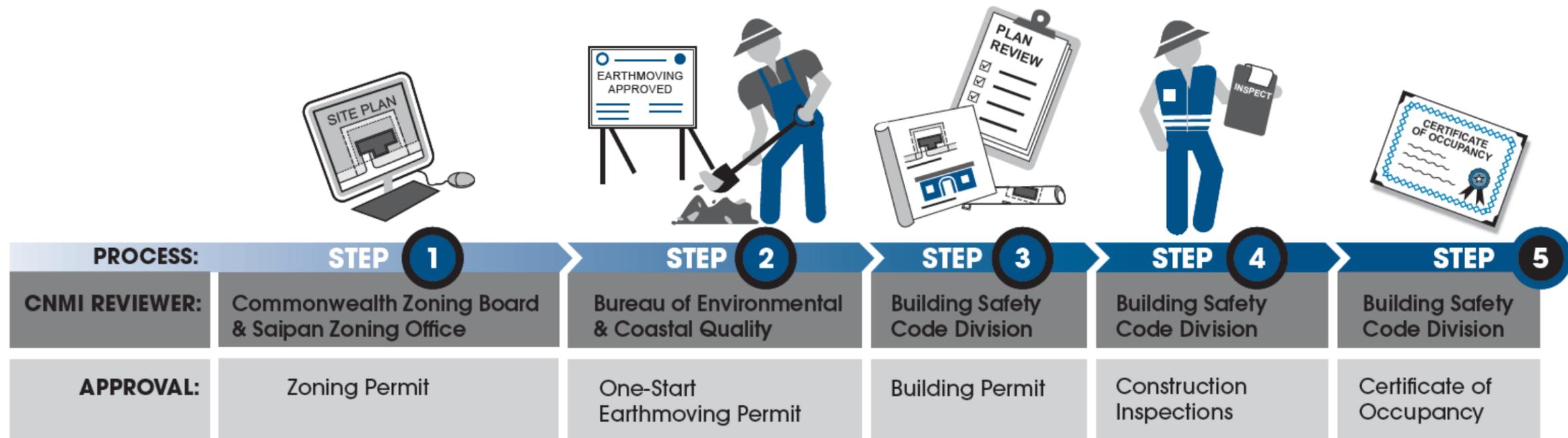
Permitting - Division of Coastal Resources Management (gov.mp)

Division of Coastal Resources Management. 2021. Permit Application Forms and Resources.

Permit Application Forms and Resources - Division of Coastal Resources Management (gov.mp)

Division of Coastal Resources Management. 2021. Minor Permit Application.

MINOR-Permit-Application_v1fillable.pdf (gov.mp)





DETAILED PERMITTING PROCESS



PROCESS:	STEP 1	STEP 2	STEP 3	STEP 4	STEP 5
CNMI REVIEWER:	Commonwealth Zoning Board & Saipan Zoning Office	Bureau of Environmental & Coastal Quality	Building Safety Code Division	Building Safety Code Division	Building Safety Code Division
APPROVAL:	Zoning Permit	One-Start Earthmoving Permit If necessary: Minor Development Permit for Areas of Particular Concern	Building Permit	Construction Inspections	Certificate of Occupancy
IMPORTANCE:	The zoning permit assures the structures and utility positions on the site follow all setback and utility easement requirements. It helps improve your home's resistance to fire and avoid utility maintenance issues.	The One-Start Earthmoving Permit protects the natural resources of the CNMI. This expedited process eliminates the need to go from agency to agency for a project review. If a project is located in an Area of Particular Concern, a Minor Development Permit is required to describe the methods used to avoid or mitigate environmental impacts.	Two sets of building plans are reviewed for the Building Permit. The drawings must be signed by a CNMI-licensed professional engineer or architect who makes sure the drawings comply with the currently adopted building codes. The review results in a home design that is more resilient to natural disasters.	The periodic visits by a building inspector make sure the construction work matches the permit, building code, and plans. The inspector can provide building code expertise to assist the homeowner with construction questions and minimize potentially expensive mistakes.	After completion, a Certificate of Occupancy is issued notifying the homeowner that the project follows the construction and safety standards of the CNMI.
CONTACT INFORMATION:					
AGENCY:	Commonwealth Zoning Board & Saipan Zoning Office	Division of Environmental Quality Division of Coastal Resources Management	Department of Public Works Building Safety Code Division	Department of Public Works Building Safety Code Division	Department of Public Works Building Safety Code Division
PHYSICAL ADDRESS:	2nd Floor, Joeten Dandan Commercial Building	Gualo Rai Center Chalan Pale Arnold - Middle Road	2nd Floor, Oleal Joeten Commercial Center Saipan, MP 96950	2nd Floor, Oleal Joeten Commercial Center Saipan, MP 96950	2nd Floor, Oleal Joeten Commercial Center Saipan, MP 96950
TELEPHONE:	(670) 234-9661	(670) 664-8500	(670) 234-2726	(670) 234-2726	(670) 234-2726
MAILING ADDRESS:	P.O. Box 10007 Saipan, MP 96950	P.O. Box 501304 Saipan, MP 96950			
WEBSITE:	https://cnmizoning.com/	http://deq.gov.mp	https://dcrm.gov.mp/		