

10 Things You Need to Know (and Have) Before You Can (or Should) Build



Although building a new home may appear to be a daunting experience it doesn't have to be. With careful planning, attention to detail and staying organized, the process will be exciting and rewarding. With a little effort and having right people involved your dream home can become a reality! For this complicated task to be easy and fun you need the right attitude, be able to maintain realistic expectations, have a willingness to seek out the advice of professionals and to be open to learning. The hardest part is the beginning.

To help you plan and prepare for your project we have constructed a list of 10 important things that you need to know (and have in place) before you commence with construction. Assuming that you have yet to purchase a building lot these suggestions will help you save time, reduce costs, and minimize stress.

1. **Be Realistic About Time**

It's hard to imagine how long a project will actually take. There are tasks, milestones, hurdles and approvals to get through. There will always be surprises along the way, even under the best circumstances. Below are the major milestones for a new home building project, along with average timeframes. By viewing the big picture broken down to its components, you can get an idea of how long a project can take.

Task	Timeframe (in weeks)
Determining the suitability of a building lot, obtaining preliminary site work costs, and acquiring the property.	4-6
Preparing a preliminary home design to determine construction costs.	1-2
Obtaining a commitment from your bank.	2-4
Finalizing the design plans and the site plan for the building lot.	3-4
Preparing the project schedule.	.5
Obtaining approvals and the building permit.	1-5
Closing on your combined construction loan/end-loan (mortgage).	2-3

Breaking ground once permit and funding are in place.	1-2
Construction timeframe to Certificate of Occupancy	16-24
Total	31-52

This process can go faster depending on your financing source, if you are building from an existing or modified plan instead of a completely custom plan, the jurisdiction you are in and your ability to make choices on finishes quickly.

2. **Be Realistic About Your Budget and Costs**

The cost of a new home can quickly escalate and get out of your price range if you have unrealistic needs in size, use complex designs, require expensive materials and products or choose an unsuitable building lot. This is where trust becomes a very important factor in your relationship with your designer/builder. (I highly recommend that you work with a design/build firm that offers full-service from designs and engineering all the way through completion of construction.) Listening, communicating, educating, and guiding are traits that a designer/builder should have; which are just as important as knowing how to design and build a house. Let your contractor’s experience help you with identifying lower cost strategies. An experienced designer/builder knows how to create beautiful and highly functional effects with low-cost methods and materials.

Building a low-maintenance, highly efficient, quality home that will last for generations is not an inexpensive proposition, but it certainly can be affordable. You just have to maintain a balance with what you can afford and the realities of building.

3. **Find Preliminary Designs Early**

From a preliminary drawing and even pictures of floor plans and elevations from the Internet you can get a reliable working construction budget. This is extremely helpful because you’ll know early if the cost of this design is in line with your budget. After this important step you can make changes and additions or select another plan.

4. **Find an Approved and Suitable Building Lot**

Knowing where the new home will be going or at least having options of where it will be going is very important to having a complete picture of your budget. Without having this component figured out designing the floor plan can be waste of a time, if the house doesn’t fit where you want it to go there aren’t a lot of options. The size of the building lot will determine many aspects of the home’s size and design. The building lot also determines the true cost of construction. So, put your energy into finding the right location so you can determine your land and site work costs.

5. **Develop Your Relationship With a Bank Early**

You can explore land, get some idea of site work costs and obtain preliminary pricing for construction of your home simply and quickly. At the same time, you can be checking your credit scores and obtaining your bank pre-qualification. This will help set the budget goals that you will want to stay within.

6. **Find the Hidden Secrets Now**

The conditions and requirements of the building lot can impact costs substantially. A building lot that seems reasonably priced may be so because it is going to be expensive to develop in preparation for the house. Oftentimes, people don't find this out until they have already purchased the lot. Local zoning issues and deed restrictions may require special structural or cosmetic considerations that will impact cost.

The best place to begin is to visit with the local building, zoning, and sanitary departments. Let them know your plans about the house and the building lot. These departments exist to be of service to you, ask them what they know of the location and if there are any issues that you need to be aware of. They should also tell you if there are any special procedures or requirements before obtaining the building permit. Finally, ask about how the town calculates the building permit fee and if there are any other fees or charges.

7. **Hire Your Designer/Builder Early**

An experienced and reputable design/build firm that is willing to assist you during the early "exploration" stage of your project is invaluable. Get them involved early so they can help guide you through all of the early fact-finding and decision-making.

8. **Plan Your Homes Design, Materials and Finished Product Now – Not After Construction Starts**

If you have unique furniture or artwork that you want to highlight in the home, now is the time to be planning the design around these focal points. The more you can do your homework now and identify the products you plan to use (cabinetry, countertops, flooring, bathroom fixtures, lighting fixtures, architectural details etc.,) the less likely you will run over budget. You will know the cost of these items up front and they will become part of your project budget. Homeowners tend to make their selections later during the project, working from a budgetary allowance and end up spending more money than they planned. If you do your research and make your selections early you will save a lot of money. You will also want to consider planning for energy efficiency for your home so that you can achieve lower monthly energy costs.

9. **Obtain the Needed Documents For Your Building Permit**

Here is a list of documents that you will need for your project to be approved and to obtain your building permit. Your designer/builder can coordinate this process.

- a. Finalized home design plans that have complete details, specifications, dimensions, floor plans, elevations and wall-sections. The home plans must conform to local and State building codes. Unfortunately “off-the-shelf” plans purchased from Internet websites don’t conform and must be redrawn.
- b. Structural engineering certifications for any aspect of the wood frame that is pre-engineered and manufactured, for example; roof trusses, floor I-joists or trusses, and laminated veneer lumber (LVL) beams.
- c. A completed site plan that is stamped by a licensed civil engineer.
- d. Sanitary approval if the site requires a septic system.

10. **Prepare a Project Schedule**

A sure way to keep your project on track, to keep everyone informed about work progress and to make information readily available is to use a project schedule. Project schedules can change and get modified depending on inspections, owner decisions or changes; but having it spelled out so everyone has the same information is a great way to keep everyone comfortable.