

OTTAWA WINDOW PROS

Permits & Building Code

Building permits, Ontario Building Code, when permits are required

3 Expert Answers from Construction Brain

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Q1

What are the window requirements for a legal basement apartment?

Legal basement apartments in Ottawa must meet specific window requirements for egress (emergency exit) and natural light. The Ontario Building Code requires at least one window in each bedroom that can serve as an emergency exit, plus windows for natural light in living areas.

Egress window requirements are the most critical for basement apartments. Each bedroom must have a window with a minimum opening area of 0.35 square meters (about 3.8 square feet) and no dimension less than 380mm (15 inches). The window sill cannot be more than 1.5 meters (about 5 feet) above the floor. These windows must open directly to the exterior or to a window well that meets specific size requirements - typically at least 760mm (30 inches) wide and projecting at least 760mm from the foundation wall.

Natural light requirements mandate that habitable rooms have window area equal to at least 5% of the floor area, with half of that being openable for ventilation. This means a 100 square foot bedroom needs at least 5 square feet of window area. Living rooms, kitchens, and bedrooms all need natural light, though bathrooms and storage areas don't.

Window wells are often necessary for basement egress windows and must be properly sized, waterproofed, and drained. The well needs a clear opening width of at least 760mm and must project far enough from the wall to allow the window to fully open. Proper drainage and waterproofing are essential to prevent water infiltration.

In Ottawa's climate, basement windows should be energy efficient with good insulation properties. Triple-pane windows with low-E coatings help prevent condensation issues common in below-grade installations. Proper installation with adequate air sealing and moisture barriers is crucial.

City of Ottawa requirements may vary for specific situations - confirm egress and natural light requirements with Ottawa Building Services before finalizing your basement apartment plans. A building permit is typically required for basement apartment conversions, and window modifications are part of that approval process.

Q2

What building code requirements apply to windows in Ottawa?

Window installations in Ottawa must comply with the Ontario Building Code (OBC) along with local Ottawa bylaws. Most window replacements in existing openings don't require permits, but there are specific requirements for safety, energy efficiency, and structural integrity.

Energy efficiency standards are a key requirement under the OBC. New windows must meet minimum thermal performance standards, with ENERGY STAR certification typically required for windows in Ottawa's Climate Zone 6. This means windows need a U-factor of 1.22 or lower and specific Energy Rating (ER) values. Triple-pane windows with Low-E coatings and argon fill are often necessary to meet these standards in Ottawa's climate.

Safety requirements include proper egress window sizing in bedrooms and basements - windows must provide adequate emergency exit routes with minimum opening dimensions. Tempered or laminated safety glass is required in specific locations near doors, in bathrooms, and in windows close to floor level. The OBC also mandates proper flashing and weatherproofing to prevent water infiltration and structural damage.

Structural considerations become important when changing window sizes or creating new openings. While replacing windows in existing openings typically doesn't require permits, enlarging openings or installing new windows requires structural analysis and building permits. Load-bearing considerations, proper header sizing, and maintaining structural integrity are critical code requirements that licensed installers must address.

Installation standards under the OBC require proper air sealing, insulation, and weatherproofing around window frames. Windows must be installed plumb, level, and square with appropriate shimming and fastening. Vapor barriers and thermal breaks must be properly maintained to prevent condensation and energy loss.

City of Ottawa requirements may vary for specific situations - confirm permit requirements and local bylaws with your licensed installer or Ottawa Building Services before starting any window project that involves structural changes.

Q3

Can I add a window to an exterior wall without a permit?

Adding a new window to an exterior wall requires a building permit in Ottawa. This is considered a structural modification that affects the building envelope and requires professional engineering assessment.

Why permits are required for new window openings: Creating a new opening in an exterior wall involves cutting through structural elements like studs, potentially affecting the wall's load-bearing capacity. The work must comply with Ontario Building Code requirements for structural integrity, insulation, air sealing, and fire safety. Additionally, the new window must meet energy efficiency standards for Ottawa's Climate Zone 6.

The permit process typically involves: submitting drawings showing the proposed window location, structural calculations if needed, and specifications for the window unit. A licensed contractor will handle the permit

application and ensure the work meets code requirements. The installation requires inspection to verify proper framing, insulation, weatherproofing, and structural support.

Ottawa-specific considerations: In our climate, improper installation can lead to significant heat loss, ice damming, or moisture infiltration. The new opening must be properly flashed and sealed to handle Ottawa's temperature extremes and precipitation. Most quality contractors include permit costs in their project estimates.

Important distinction: While replacing an existing window in the same opening typically doesn't require a permit, creating a new opening always does. Attempting unpermitted structural work can create liability issues and problems when selling your home.

Next steps: Contact a licensed window installer who can assess your project, handle the permit application, and ensure code-compliant installation. For professional window installation work, find licensed installers through the Ottawa Construction Network.

Disclaimer: This guide is provided for informational purposes only by Ottawa Window Pros. It does not constitute professional advice. Always consult qualified, licensed contractors and your local building authority before starting any construction or renovation project. Information is current as of March 15, 2026 and may change. Visit ottawawindowinstall.ca for the latest answers.