



Planning Division
CLIENT ASSISTANCE MEMO

Single Family Setbacks 101

The Basics:

A setback is defined in the Gig Harbor Municipal Code (GHMC) as the distance between the building line and the nearest boundary to the site or lot, measured at right angles to the boundary. The area created by a setback is known as a yard. Setbacks are designated as front yard, rear yard, and side yards. Structures cannot be located in setbacks. A general variance is required to locate structures in the required setbacks.

Regardless of where the front door is located, the front yard is located adjacent to the public street, or for lots that do not front on a public street, the front yard is adjacent to the first lot line crossed when accessing the site from the public right of way. The rear yard is located adjacent to the lot line that is the furthest and most opposite from the front lot line. All remaining boundaries are considered sides. Special provisions apply to lots abutting more than one public street. Please contact staff for assistance in determining the location of setbacks if you have an irregular, corner or through lot.

Gig Harbor's residential zones list three front setbacks which apply to different parts of a typical house. The code lists a house setback, a garage setback and a porch setback. The house setback is applicable to the primary house and any accessory structures other than a garage.

What is allowed in a setback?

- Roof eaves (including gutters), bump out windows, fireplace chimneys and decks/balconies may encroach up to 18 inches into the setback. See [GHMC 17.04.880](#).
- Paved terraces, fences, retaining walls, at grade stairs, rockeries, poles, posts, ornaments, furniture and other customary yard accessories may be permitted in any yard subject to height limitations and requirements limiting the obstruction of visibility at intersections as per [GHMC 17.04.880](#).
- Sheds, big toys, gazebos and mechanical units including heat pumps are not allowed in setbacks.

What are my setbacks?

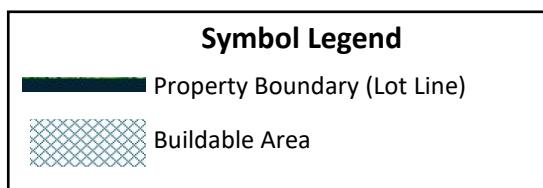
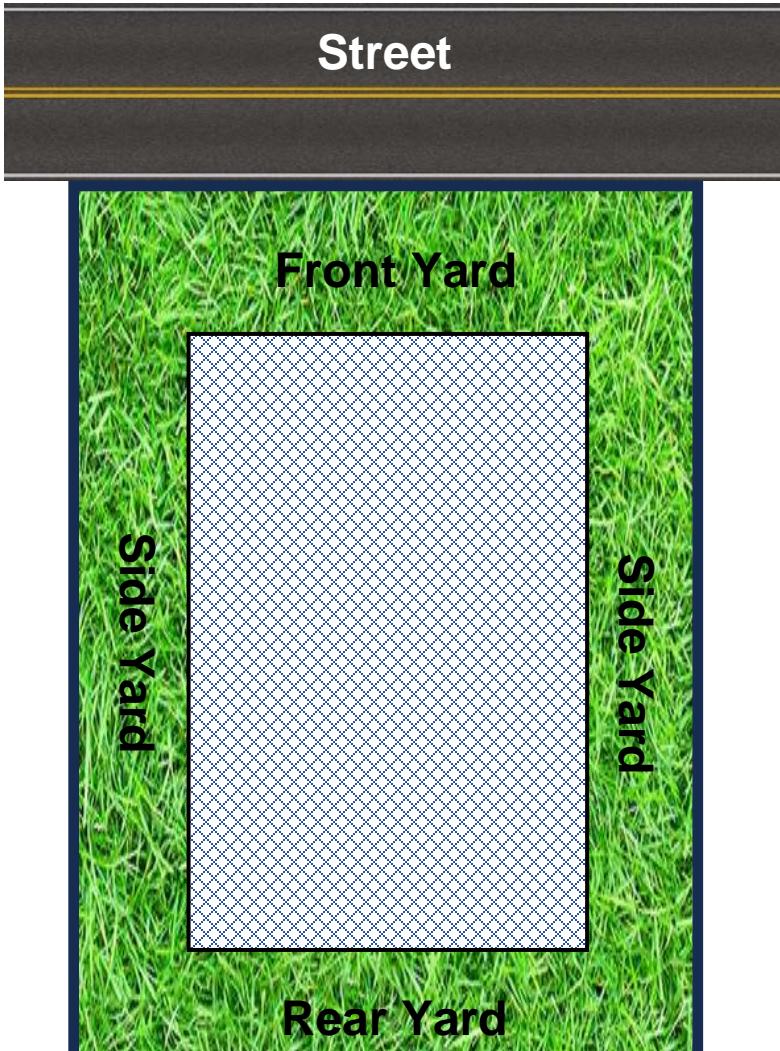
Setbacks vary based on the zoning of the subject property. Please contact the Planning Division with either your parcel number or address so staff can determine the zone in which your property is located.

What if my existing house does not meet the current setbacks?

There are many existing structures that were built before current setback standards and are located closer to the property line than presently allowed. Structures that were legally constructed prior to the current regulations are considered "nonconforming" and special provisions exist in [GHMC 17.68](#) for such structures. If you have a nonconforming house or other building and are considering remodeling, expanding or replacing the structure you will want to talk with Planning staff about the specifics of the code and any additional permit requirements that may apply to your situation. Please be aware that any new additions will need to meet current setbacks.

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Typical Lot Layout

The image to the left depicts a standard lot accessed off a public street and shows where the setbacks would occur. This image is intended to show the most common lot configuration.

Things to keep in mind:

Property Lines: You will need to locate the property corners to determine where your property lines are located. This may require a survey of your property if the corners cannot be located.

Front Lot Line: Is the lot line adjacent to the public street. If the interior lot does not have a lot line adjacent to a public street, the front lot line shall be the total line first crossed when gaining access to the lot from a private street or access easement.

Streets: The right of way associated with your street may be larger than the built roadway. You must use your property corners to determine where your property starts.

Buildable Area: This term is used to describe the area of the lot on which you may locate a structure. In this simple example the setbacks are the only limitation affecting the location of a future home. Be aware that critical areas, their buffers and easements may also affect the buildable area of your lot.

Setbacks: The area that makes up a yard is subject to the requirements for setbacks described on the front of this memo.