



SAN FRANCISCO  
PLANNING  
DEPARTMENT

## GENERAL PLANNING INFORMATION

# Fences

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Date:  
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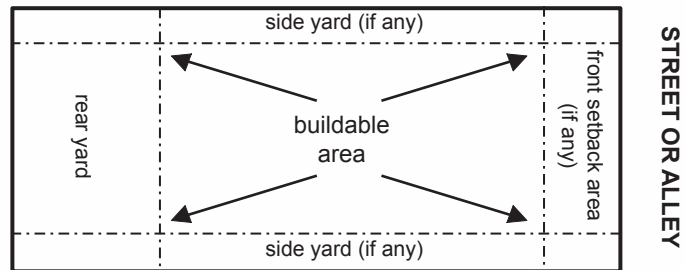
Subject:  
**Fences**

## Introduction

A building permit is not required for a fence that is three feet or less in height at the front of a property, or six feet or less in height at the side or rear property lines. Neighborhood notification is not required for fences ten feet or less in height. If a fence is ten feet or less in height and it meets the restrictions discussed below, it will usually be approved over the counter.

Controls on allowable heights of fences are contained in the Planning Code. They are based on the location of the fence(s) on the property and required yards and setbacks. In all residential zoning districts there are rear yard requirements. There may be side yard and front setback requirements as well. There are rear yard requirements in some commercial districts and in any commercial, industrial or mixed use district at the first story containing a dwelling. (Thus a ground floor dwelling would trigger a rear yard requirement at the ground level in these districts). The area of a lot that is not subject to a required setback is known as the 'buildable area'. (See Figure 1).

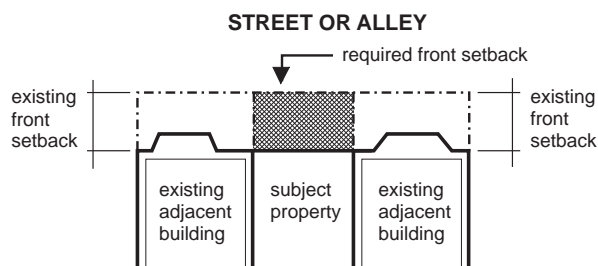
*Figure 1:  
Yards and Setbacks*



## FRONT SETBACK

Front setback requirements apply in RH, RM and RTO districts which encompass most San Francisco residential neighborhoods. These are generally based on the location of the front building walls of the adjacent properties fronting on the same street. The required setback for a property is usually an average of the setbacks of these two adjacent properties (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Front Setbacks



If your property is a corner lot and subject to a front setback requirement it would be equal to one-half of the setback of the one adjacent property. (In a few cases there are front setbacks that are legislated by ordinance. See the discussion below under Variance).

If there are no adjacent setbacks, e.g. the adjacent buildings are built to the front property line, then your lot would have no front setback requirements.

The maximum required front setback is equal to 15% of the lot depth or 15 feet, whichever is less. So even if the adjacent buildings are substantially set back, you would not be required to set back beyond the maximum.

If you propose a fence within the required front setback area, it is limited to a height of 3 feet if solid, and 6 feet if 75% open. A 75% open fence would typically be something like a wrought iron gate where the solid portions of the fence make up 25% or less of the total area of the fence (see Figure 3, left). A picket fence with minor openings between slats would not qualify unless the slats were very thin and/or had large gaps between them (see Figure 3 right). (Please note, you will not be permitted a fence that is 3' solid with any additional fencing above that height in the front setback.)

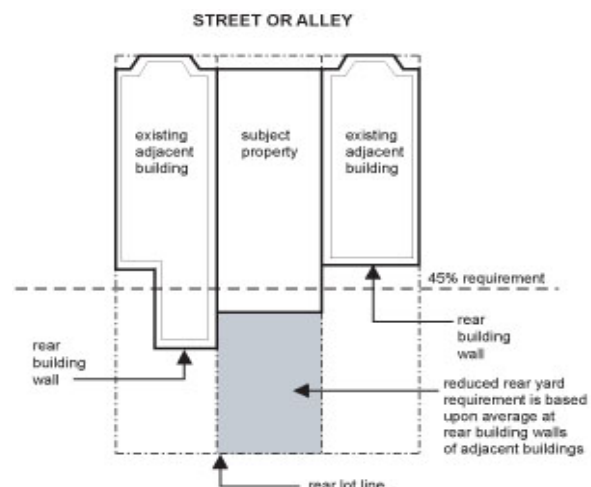
## REAR YARDS

Generally, rear yards are required in all residential districts. With few exceptions, the requirements are either 25% or 45% of lot depth depending on the zoning. Rear yards are required in some commercial districts from the ground up, and in all commercial districts at residential levels, typically as a 25% of lot depth requirement. In the case of the 45% of lot depth requirement, the rear yard can be reduced based on an average of the adjacent building walls, i.e. if these building walls project further than the 45% requirement on your lot, then your requirement can be reduced to the average of those projections (see Figure 4). The requirement cannot be reduced to less than 25% of lot depth or 15' whichever is greater.

Figure 3: 'Open' and Solid Fences



Figure 4: Rear Yards



In the required rear yard area, the maximum allowable height of a fence is 10 feet above grade. (There may be circumstances, particularly when there are substantial grade differences between parcels, when the Zoning Administrator could authorize a fence up to six feet above a retaining wall on a case-by-case basis regardless of total height above the grade.)

**SIDE YARDS**

In a limited number of residential areas there are also side yard requirements (Residential House, One-Family (Detached Dwellings)). Per Planning Code Section 133, lots with a width of 28 feet or greater must provide side yards, increasing in size based on the width of the lot up to a maximum of 5 feet on each side. The limitations described in the preceding section for rear yards would also apply in side yards, i.e. fences are allowed up to 10 feet in height.

If you have any questions about determining your yard or setback requirements you should contact the Planning Information Center (PIC) by e-mail *pic@sfgov.org* or phone at 415-558-6377.

**BUILDABLE AREA**

You may build a fence taller than 10 feet within the buildable area of the lot (see Figure 1 and Figure 5). In residential districts, and some commercial districts, this would require a neighborhood notification, known as Section 311/312 notification. (See « 3 0 0 0 ¶ 133-211.2(a) 211.2(b) § 211.2(c) » § 211.2(d) ). A fence taller than 10 feet in the buildable area may also be subject to review under the Residential Design Guidelines.

**VARIANCE**

If you wish to build a fence in a required yard or setback that exceeds the limitations stated above, you would need to seek and justify a Variance (« 3 0 0 0 ¶ 133-211.2(a) 211.2(b) § 211.2(c) » § 211.2(d) ). (In limited areas there are front setbacks that are established by ordinance. These are known as ‘legislated setbacks’. The rules for fences in these areas are the same as ‘typical’ front setback

requirements. However, a variance cannot be issued for exceptions to legislated setbacks. The setback would have to be modified or abolished by ordinance, i.e. the Board of Supervisors, so that the fence would be allowable.)

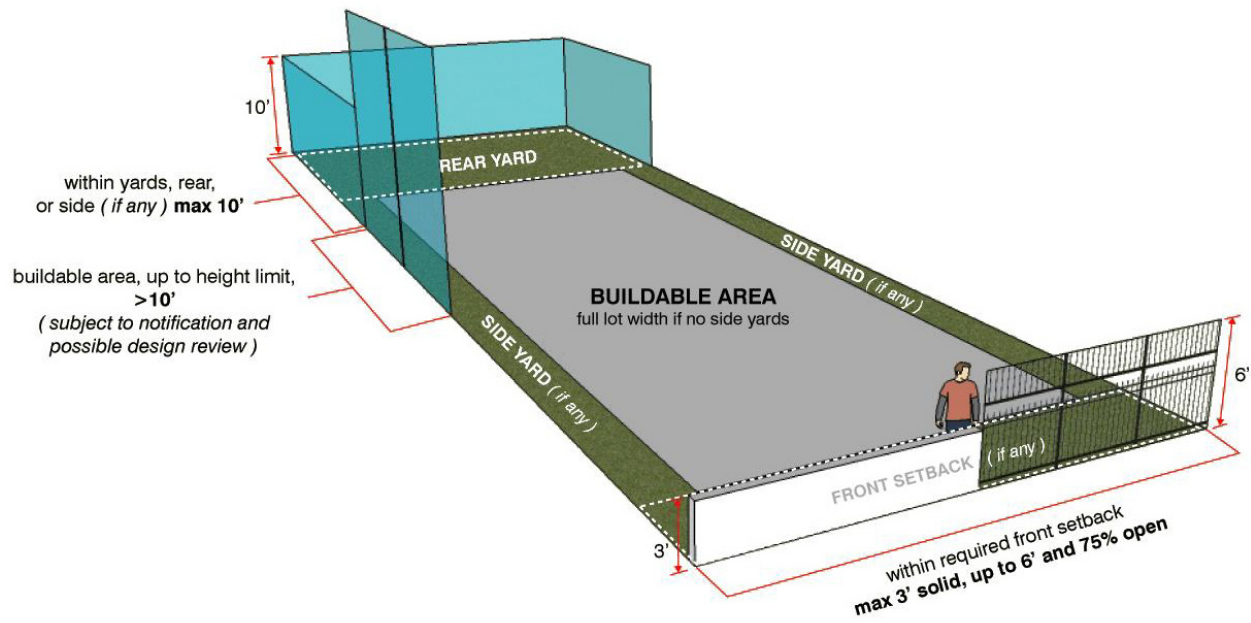
**PERMITTING**

When applying for a fence permit, provide plans that show the precise location of the fence on the site, the location of any required setbacks, and the height of the fence. If you are constructing a fence greater than 3 feet in height in the front setback and are relying on openness of the fence to gain additional allowable height, you should also show by illustration or diagram how the proposed fence meets the openness requirement.

Summary

Figure 5 below illustrates the Planning Code restrictions on fences. In summary, fences in a required front setback are limited to a maximum height of 3’ if solid or 6’ if 75% open. Fences in required yards, rear or side, are limited to 10’ in height. Fences in the buildable area have no specified height restriction other than the applicable height limit for the lot. However, for fences greater than 10’ in height neighborhood notification may be required and design review standards may limit the allowable height of the fence. Again, If the fence is less than or equal to 10 feet in height and it meets all other applicable limitations, it will typically be approved over the counter.

Figure 5:  
Illustration of Fence Height Limits



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**FOR OTHER PLANNING INFORMATION:  
Call or visit the San Francisco Planning Department**

**Central Reception**  
1650 Mission Street, Suite 400  
San Francisco CA 94103-2479

TEL: **415.558.6378**  
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WEB: <http://www.sfplanning.org>

**Planning Information Center (PIC)**  
1660 Mission Street, First Floor  
San Francisco CA 94103-2479

TEL: **415.558.6377**  
Planning staff are available by phone and at the PIC counter.  
No appointment is necessary.