

# Tiny Houses On Wheels (THOWs) as Accessory Dwelling Units in the City of Port Townsend

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## Background

Starting on July 1, 2023, per Ordinance 3306, Tiny Houses on Wheels (THOWs) will be permitted as Accessory Dwelling Units (ADU), subject to the requirements of Port Townsend Municipal Code 17.58.030. An ADU is a dwelling unit that is accessory to an existing primary residence.

This document is specific to THOWs as ADUs, where up to 2 THOWs may be placed on a lot with an existing single-family residence. For information on how to establish a Tiny House on Wheels Community with up to 12 THOWs, please see our THOW Community handout. For general information about ADUs, please see our ADU handout. These handouts and any additional THOW forms and documents are located at: <https://cityofpt.us/planning-community-development/page/forms-documents>

## THOW Definitions, Requirements, and Permitting

### 1) WHAT IS A THOW?

THOW is shorthand for a “Tiny House on Wheels”. Depending on who you talk to, THOW can refer to a variety of structures so it is important to know what types of structures are permitted as THOWs in Port Townsend.

Per PTMC 17.58, a THOW is defined as a structure no larger than 400 square feet, excluding loft space, that meets the following conditions:

- Is licensed and registered with the Department of Motor Vehicles;
- Is constructed and certified to building and inspections standards in PTMC 17.58.030;
- Is no larger than allowed for movement on public highways;
- Has at least 150 square feet of first floor living space and does not exceed 16 feet in height;
- Is a detached self-contained unit which includes areas for cooking, sleeping, and sanitation.

A THOW as described above is technically a **Park Model Recreational Vehicle**, which is a factory-built structure or dwelling constructed to ANSI standards (not State Building Codes) and is certified through the Washington Department of Labor and Industries (L&I). Since Park Models are typically designed for temporary or recreational use, THOWs in Port Townsend will be required to meet additional construction standards on top of Park Model standards to increase energy efficiency and be suitable for all-year, day-to-day use as a dwelling.

**Buyer beware:** Not all structures advertised as “tiny homes”, “tiny houses on wheels” or “park models” meet the requirements to be established as a THOW in Port Townsend. THOWs that do not meet Port Townsend’s requirements are prohibited as ADUs.

## 2) WHO REGULATES THOWS?

The Washington Department of Labor and Industries (L&I) regulates the **construction** of Park Model RVs (and other factory-built structures), while the City of Port Townsend’s Department of Planning and Community Development regulates the **placement and use** of these units within city limits.

**NOTE:** Please be aware that the State of Washington and City of Port Townsend do not define tiny houses on wheels the same way. According to the State of Washington, a Park Model RV is not a “tiny house” but is instead considered a type of recreational vehicle. The State defines a THOW or tiny house as meeting State Building Code requirements, which Park Models do not. More information: [https://lni.wa.gov/licensing-permits/docs/TinyHomeTinyHouse.pdf?language\\_id=1](https://lni.wa.gov/licensing-permits/docs/TinyHomeTinyHouse.pdf?language_id=1).

The difference between Washington State Code and Port Townsend Municipal Code does not prevent someone from establishing a Park Model THOW in Port Townsend; however, it does mean that different terminology may apply when talking to L&I or the City. Tips for when to use the term Park Model or Tiny House are provided later in this document.

## 3) WHERE ARE THOW ADUs PERMITTED IN THE CITY OF PORT TOWNSEND?

In the City of Port Townsend, THOWs may be permitted as ADUs in R-I, R-II, and R-III zones subject to the provisions of Section 17.16.020 PTMC:

<https://www.codepublishing.com/WA/PortTownsend/#!/PortTownsend17/PortTownsend1716.html#17.16.020> .

Refer to the City’s zoning map to determine the zone for a specific property and verify it is within the city limits: <https://cityofpt.maps.arcgis.com/home/index.html>. For properties outside the city limits please contact Jefferson County Department of Community Development at 360-379-4450 or [dcd@co.jefferson.wa.us](mailto:dcd@co.jefferson.wa.us).

A THOW ADU cannot be placed on a property that does not already have an existing single-family residence, as the THOW must be accessory to a primary residence. A Restrictive Covenant is required when the property has more than one lot and the THOW will be placed on an adjacent lot, across property lines, or does not meet minimum setbacks. The Restrictive Covenant will bind the THOW to the existing single-family residence. The applicant must pay for the staff time required to prepare this document and they are also required to record the document with the Jefferson County Auditor’s office and pay all recording fees.

**4) WHAT MANUFACTURING STANDARDS DO THOWs HAVE TO MEET?**

Per PTMC 17.58, a THOW proposed for use as an ADU must meet national standards as a Park Model (ANSI 119.5) and the National Electrical Code, NFPA 70, Article 552 as evidenced by a **blue Park Model insignia** (see page 8) from the State Department of Labor and Industries (L&I);

**AND**

THOWs must also meet City of Port Townsend specific construction standards (PTMC 17.58.030) as evidenced by a certification from an Architect or Engineer licensed to practice in the State of Washington. City of Port Townsend standards include:

1. Insulation to a minimum of R-13 in walls, and R-19 in the ceiling.
2. Residential grade insulated doors and windows, with windows to be double-pane and of tempered or laminated safety glazing.
3. Full trim surrounds for all exterior windows and doors.
4. Roof pitch of 2:12 or more.
5. Roofing materials of 20-year asphalt composite shingles, minimum Class A rating.
6. Electrical system that meets NFPA 70 NEW, Article 551 or 552, as applicable.
7. Low voltage electrical systems meet ANSI/RVIA Low Voltage Standard, current edition
8. Wall framing studs are 24” on center maximum, minimum 2x4 wood, metal studs or equivalent structural insulated panels.
9. Mechanical equipment shall be incorporated into the structure and not located on the roof.

**TIP:** When establishing a THOW according to the above **ANSI** and Port Townsend standards, be sure to use the term “Park Model” to describe your structure when talking to L&I (and not “tiny house”). See question 2 for more information.

**5) CAN A THOW BE BUILT TO STATE BUILDING CODE STANDARDS INSTEAD OF THE ABOVE ANSI PARK MODEL STANDARD?**

Yes. PTMC 17.58 specifies that THOWs must be constructed to ANSI 119.5 Park Model standard (plus the additional design/construction standards reference above); however, a THOW constructed to International Residential Code/State Building Code standards exceeds these standards and is therefore permitted. For more information, please refer to the 6/5/2023 THOW Director’s Interpretation at <https://cityofpt.us/planning-community-development/page/forms-documents> and the tiny house flow chart (see page 9). A THOW constructed to building code standards requires a **gold tiny house/modular housing insignia** from L&I (see page 8).

**TIP:** When establishing a THOW to **State Building Code** standards, be sure to use the term “Tiny house” to describe the structure when talking to L&I (and not “Park Model”). See question 2 for more information.

**6) WHAT ARE THE SITE-SPECIFIC REQUIREMENTS FOR A THOW ADU?**

<b>Zoning Districts</b>	Proposed site is in an R-I, R-II, or R-III zoning district.
<b>Setbacks</b>	THOW must meet required setbacks to the property line.

<b>Lot Coverage</b>	The area of a THOW and any other structures on a lot are used to count lot coverage. The addition of a THOW should not exceed the allowable lot coverage for the applicable zone.
<b>Fire Separation</b>	THOW must be located a fire separation distance of at least 10 feet away from any other structures on the premises.
<b>Water/Sewer</b>	THOW must be connected to City utilities (water and sewer) that have been extended to the THOW pad– a separate plumbing permit will be required if the extension was not previously established. Connections must be permanent in nature (no garden hoses from the primary residence or composting toilets), compliant with current State Plumbing Code. For properties served by a septic system, please contact the Jefferson County Health Department to determine if a THOW ADU is permitted.
<b>Electrical</b>	THOWs must be supplied with power – no extension cords are allowed from the primary residence or other structures on site. A separate electrical permit is required from L&I.
<b>Site Pad</b>	THOW must be placed upon a concrete or decomposed granite pad. THOW must remain on wheels and cannot be placed on a permanent foundation.
<b>Tie Downs</b>	The THOW must remain on wheels (no permanent foundation); however, tie downs are required and the use of jacks is encouraged.
<b>Skirting and Screening</b>	Undercarriage must be skirted with fire retardant skirting. If utility connections are not located underneath the unit (behind the skirting) they must be screened with approved materials.
<b>Design Elements</b>	THOW must not look like an ordinary RV or trailer. It needs to meet the appearance standards to look like a conventional residential structure rather than a recreational structure incorporating designs and materials typically used for residential structure. See PTMC 17.58.040
<b>Size and Height</b>	Maximum of 400 square feet in area, but a minimum of 150 square feet of first floor living area. No more than 16 feet in height, where the height is measured from grade to the midpoint of the roof pitch.
<b>Entry</b>	THOW must have a front entry porch or steps.
<b>Addressing</b>	An address will be required, different from the primary structure or other ADU on the property.
<b>WUI Code Requirements</b>	<i>(Beginning October 30th 2023, when new State Building Code is scheduled for implementation.)</i> When applicable, THOW must meet building requirements for Wildland Urban Interface (WUI). For example, siding materials must be Ignition Resistance Class 1, one hour rated fire resistive construction, or non-combustible materials.

<b>Parking Requirements</b>	Additional off-street parking for ADUs is no longer required; however, on-site parking for the primary residence is still required. See PTMC 17.72 Off-Street Parking and Loading on-line for more information or ask a PCD staff member.
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## 7) WHAT PERMITS ARE REQUIRED TO ESTABLISH A THOW AS AN ADU?

The following permits are required from the Planning and Community Development Department, City of Port Townsend:

1. A THOW Site Permit is required to establish a THOW an ADU, see question 8 for details.
2. A separate plumbing permit is also required to establish water and sewer connections to the THOW site, if not previously established. A separate document detailing the water/sewer connection requirements for THOWs is located at: <https://cityofpt.us/planning-community-development/page/forms-documents>
3. A building permit is also required when adding 4 or more exterior front entry steps and/or a front porch that is over 30 inches in height.
4. Minor Improvement Permit (MIP) if the applicant wants to establish a new driveway for the THOW (new driveway access from street, not on site parking pad).
5. If tree removal is necessary to move the THOW onto a property, a permit is required to remove trees if they are located in the public right of way. If the property requires Tree Conservation, staff will review the site plan to verify the minimum number of tree units have been preserved or planted.

Additional permits or licenses are required from other agencies:

1. THOW structure has been permitted and inspected by L&I, as evidenced by either a gold or blue insignia (see page 8).
2. An electrical permit is required through L&I.
3. Park Model THOWs must be licensed and registered as a recreational vehicle through the Washington State Department of Licensing.

## 8) HOW DO I APPLY FOR A THOW ADU SITE PERMIT?

Starting July 1, 2023 - Apply for a THOW ADU Site permit **online** using the City's permitting portal: <https://ci-porttownsend-wa.smartgovcommunity.com/ApplicationPublic/ApplicationHome>

To apply for a THOW ADU Site Permit, you will need the following to complete your application.

1. Evidence of certification from L&I that the unit meets ANSI 119.5 and NFPA 70 (blue Park Model insignia) **OR** evidence from L&I that the unit meets State Building Code requirements (gold tiny house/modular house insignia).
2. If you choose the ANSI 119.5 option above, also provide evidence of certification from a licensed Architect or Engineer that THOW meets PTMC 17.58.020 and 17.58.030 and 17.58.040D. This does not apply to THOWs constructed to State Building Code standards.
3. License and registration with the Washington State Department of Licensing (Park Model only).
4. Written permission from the property owner to site the THOW on subject property (if owner is not the applicant).
5. THOW ADU Site Plan. See site plan checklist at: <https://cityofpt.us/planning-community-development/page/forms-documents>. If the property is served by a septic system, submit

written approval from the Jefferson County Health Department for the THOW to be connected to septic.

6. On the same day you submit the THOW Site Permit application, please submit a separate application for a plumbing permit for THOW water/sewer connections, **OR** provide evidence in your THOW Site Permit application that water/sewer connections were previously established/permitted.

**NOTE: Incomplete applications will not be processed.**

#### **9) HOW MANY THOW ADUs ARE ALLOWED ON A PROPERTY?**

THOWS are permitted as Accessory Dwelling Units (ADUs), and up to two ADUs may be permitted per property, subject to lot coverage and other requirements being met.

#### **10) CAN I ESTABLISH A TINY HOME ON A PERMANENT FOUNDATION INSTEAD OF ON WHEELS?**

Yes, but this requires a building permit (not a THOW permit) with engineered foundation plans through Planning and Community Development. This option is only for tiny homes constructed to State Building Code standards. Please see the tiny home flow chart on page 9 for more information. Alternatively, someone may wish to establish a THOW and keep it on wheels for a few years and then move it to a permanent location. Again, this option is only for THOWs constructed to State Building Code Standards and a building permit with engineered foundation plans is required through Planning and Community Development. A THOW constructed to ANSI 119.5 Park Model standards can never be placed on a permanent foundation.

#### **11) WHAT IS REQUIRED BEFORE A THOW CAN BE PLACED ON SITE?**

A THOW site permit must be approved and issued to the applicant before they can bring a THOW onto the property.

#### **12) HOW LONG IS A THOW PERMIT GOOD FOR?**

Since a THOW permit is for the installation of a specific THOW on a specific property, it is valid as long as the THOW is located at the permitted site. If it is to be moved to another property, or to a different location on the same property, a new site permit will be required.

#### **13) CAN I BUILD MY OWN THOW?**

It depends. Please reach out to L&I to determine feasibility, as THOW building plans must be approved/permitted by L&I. The THOW must be constructed off-site (not on the property where it will be sited), be permitted and inspected by L&I, and bear the required insignia (either blue or gold). The THOW can only be brought on site AFTER it has received final L&I inspection and insignia and plumbing and THOW site permits have been issued by the City.

Please contact the Department of Labor and Industries, Factory Assembled Structures Division, for details – 1-800-705-1411, Option 3 or [FAS1@lni.wa.gov](mailto:FAS1@lni.wa.gov) or visit <https://lni.wa.gov/licensing-permits/manufactured-modular-mobile-structures/tiny-homes/> for more information. **To avoid confusion, please reference questions 2, 4, and 5 for the correct terminology to use when communicating with L&I.**

**14) CAN I MANUFACTURE THOWs AND SELL THEM?**

Please contact L&I for more information on how to become a licensed manufacturer. Note: If you plan to manufacture THOWs within the City of Port Townsend, a City Business License is required and manufacturing activity is only permitted in specific zoning districts. Contact our office for more details.

**15) CAN I USE AN RV AS A THOW?**

No. RVs are different than Park Model RVs and do not meet the required standards for a THOW and are not permitted to be used as a dwelling in the City of Port Townsend except in established recreation campgrounds. Only Park Model RVs that meet additional design standards are permitted as THOWs.

**16) CAN THOWs BE USED AS SHORT-TERM RENTALS?**

No. THOWs are permitted as ADUs only and all ADUs, including THOWs, are prohibited from being used as a short-term rental (of 29 days or less).

**17) CAN A THOW BE PERMITTED AS A HOME OFFICE, ART STUDIO, OR STORAGE SHED?**

No. The allowance in the City Code for THOWs is intended to offer one solution for our current housing crisis, and must be established as a dwelling unit as it was designed with space for habitation, cooking, and sanitation.

**18) CAN A THOW BE PLACED ON VACANT PROPERTY?**

No. THOWs are allowed as ADUs only and must be accessory to a primary residence. See question 3 if the property is more than one lot.

**19) CAN I LIVE IN A THOW ON MY PROPERTY WHILE I BUILD MY HOUSE?**

No. Final inspection of the primary residence, and issuance of a certificate of occupancy is required before a permit can be issued for a THOW ADU. THOWs are only permitted on a property with an established primary residence. If you want to live in a detached ADU while building your primary residence, this option is only available for ADUs constructed on a permanent foundation. Contact the Department of Planning and Community Development for details.

**20) CAN A PERMITTED THOW BE MOVED TO A DIFFERENT PROPERTY?**

Yes, but you would need to go through the permitting process again to move it to a new location.

**22) WHAT ARE THE REQUIREMENTS TO REMODEL, REPAIR, OR ALTER A THOW AFTER IT HAS BEEN PERMITTED?**

For interior/exterior changes to the structure, please contact L&I for permitting requirements AND check with the City to ensure any proposed changes are not in violation of the THOW ADU Site Permit or other City Codes.

**23) CAN A STORAGE SHED OR OTHER ACCESSORY STRUCTURE BE ADDED TO THE PROPERTY FOR USE BY THOW OCCUPANTS?**

Yes, but accessory structures must meet lot coverage requirements, fire separation requirements, and setback requirements. A building permit may also be required depending on the use or size of the structure.

**24) IS A PERMIT REQUIRED TO CLEAR/GRADE A THOW SITE?**

Any clearing/grading activity should be detailed in your THOW permit application, and that work should occur after you receive your THOW site permit. A separate clearing and grading permit is only required if you plan to clear the site in advance of receiving your THOW permit.

**25) WHERE CAN I FIND DETAILS FOR WATER, SEWER, ELECTRICAL, SITE PAD, AND TIE DOWN REQUIREMENTS?**

A document detailing these requirements can be found in the THOW section on our forms and documents page: <https://cityofpt.us/planning-community-development/page/forms-documents>

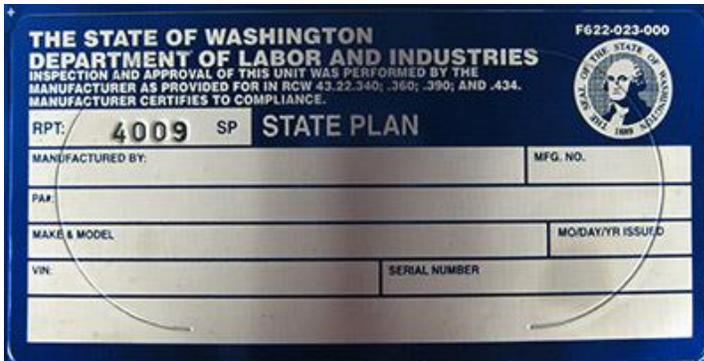
**26) WHAT IF A THOW IS INSTALLED WITHOUT A PERMIT?**

The City will require removal of the THOW from the property unless the requirements can be met through after-the-fact permitting. Code enforcement deadlines will be established to ensure compliance.

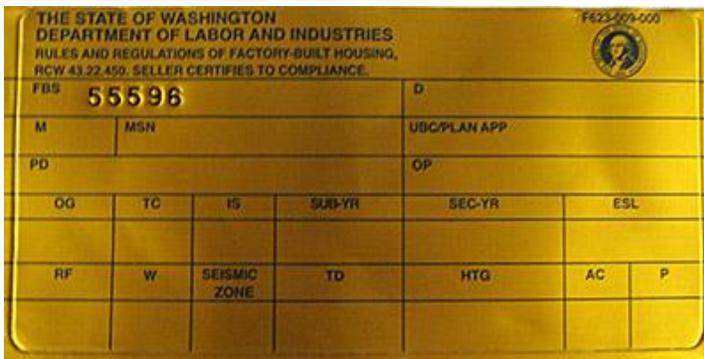
**Example L&I Insignias**

The City’s Building Inspector will check each unit when installed on site to ensure the correct insignia is present on the THOW.

**Blue Park Model RV insignia.**



**Gold Modular Housing/Tiny House insignia.**



# Tiny House Flow Chart

## Ways to establish a Tiny House accessory dwelling unit (ADU) in Port Townsend

A tiny house ADU is a dwelling unit that is **400 square feet or less** in size and accessory to an existing primary residence. A tiny house ADU can either be on wheels or placed on a permanent foundation.

### Tiny House On Wheels (THOW)

Tiny house on wheels constructed **off site** in a factory or other location. Unit **must remain on wheels**.

### Tiny House on Permanent Foundation

Tiny house on a **permanent foundation** (no wheels). These units can be constructed **on site** or **off site** and must be built to **State Building Code** standards.

Option 1: Park Model THOW built to **ANSI 119.5** standard, the National Electrical Code, NFPA 70 Article 552, **and** also constructed to additional design standards per PTMC 17.58.030.

Must have **L&I blue insignia** for recreational park model trailer.

Option 2\*: THOW built to **State Building Code** standard, please see 6/5/2023 THOW Director's interpretation for details.

Must have an **L&I gold insignia** for factory built housing.

Option 1: Tiny house is constructed **on site** (at the property in which it will remain) on a permanent foundation.

Requires a **residential building permit** for an accessory dwelling unit and inspections through Port Townsend **Department of Planning and Community Development**.

Option 2: Tiny house is constructed **off site**, such as in a factory, and then placed on site on a permanent foundation.

The **off site construction of the tiny house** requires permitting and inspections through the **Washington Department of Labor and Industries (L&I)**. Must have an **L&I gold insignia** for factory built housing.

Additionally, the **placement of the tiny house on a permanent foundation** requires a manufactured/modular home building permit application with engineered foundation plans, through the Port Townsend **Department of Planning and Community Development**.

The **off site construction of a THOW** requires permitting and inspections through the **Washington Department of Labor and Industries (L&I)**.

Additionally, the placement of the THOW requires a **plumbing permit** for water/sewer connection and a **THOW site permit** from the Port Townsend **Department of Planning and Community Development**.

**For information on THOW site and design requirements visit**  
<https://cityofpt.us/planning-community-development/page/forms-documents>