

Whose Property is It?

“Where is my property line?” is one of the most frequently asked questions posed to Planning & Development Services (PDS) staff.

Sometimes the question is asked because the property owner needs to draw a site plan to submit with a permit application. It is also a common question by homeowners wanting to build a fence.

Unfortunately, all too frequently staff is also asked this question because of a dispute between neighbors when one believes the other has encroached onto their property.

While PDS staff will try to help answer the question, they never offer a definitive answer because only professional surveyors licensed in the State of Washington can do that.

Staff is careful to not get involved in disputes over property lines because ultimately that is a private property issue and not about city regulations. In those cases, staff’s best advice is for the neighbors to hire a surveyor to determine where their property line is. If the neighbors are unable to work together to determine the location of their shared property line, the issue can end up in court to be resolved.

While staff won’t say precisely where a property line is located, they are able to pass along helpful hints and rules of thumb that at least narrow down where a property line is likely to be located.

Those helpful hints and rules of thumb include:

- Property lines are frequently located at or very near the back edge of a public sidewalk.
- Utility poles are typically located on or very close to a property line.
- The City may have a site plan on file for the property that was submitted with a permit application. That site plan can provide an idea of where a property line is located in relation to buildings and other structures, including fences, on the site.
- Legal descriptions of property sometimes include dimensions of property lines. If the lot was created as part of a plat, the subdivision map will include the dimensions and bearings of all lot lines.
- An on-line search of surveys, plats, and other documents recorded with the Snohomish County Auditor’s Office (<http://www.snoco.org/RecordedDocuments/>) can provide useful information.
- Surveyor markers showing the lot corners may still be in place. Surveyors use steel rods or rebar (about ½ inch in diameter) or wooden stakes to locate property corners. When the corners are in the front of a parcel the markers can be nails or pins embedded in the concrete curb, gutter, or sidewalk. If you have sharp eyes and a general idea of where the front corner is you might be able to find the pins on your own.

If you are planning on applying for a building permit for an addition or new construction you are going to have to know where your property lines are because you have to include a site plan with your permit application. Staff needs this information in order to ensure all setback requirements will be met.

PDS staff has prepared a brochure for those who want to draw their own site plans. Stop by City Hall to pick up a copy free of charge. Properly drawn site plans are drawn to scale, show dimensions, have a north arrow, and show the location of all building footprints, utility lines and critical areas (e.g. wetlands, streams).