

SAN JUAN ISLANDS

REAL ESTATE TAB | MARCH 2025



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RESIDENTIAL PRE-APPLICATION (RPA) VS LAND GRADING PERMIT - SAN JUAN COUNTY

When planning a construction project or purchasing a vacant parcel in San Juan County, navigating the initial process is key. The first step, in my opinion, is to hire one of the professional land use consultants as this endeavor is very challenging. Even if one works in the industry and is knowledgeable about the process, it can be character building. To be honest, I am in the industry, and I wouldn't take on the building permit process without a consultant.

A design and permitting expert's role is to determine whether a parcel contains any critical areas that could impact a project. It is also important to remember that not all parcels have the same rules; meaning not all parcels require the same amount of work to acquire a permit. Each parcel has a designated zoning type and that type then needs to be cross referenced to the County's land use codes.

One of your first decisions will be how to proceed with the permit application. You have several options, but the most typical include processing a Residential Pre-Application (RPA), a Grading and Tree removal Permit or if your project is straight forward with no time restrictions, heading forward with the formal building permit application.

If you are purchasing unimproved land, the issue will be the time restraints that you may be operating under to process your feasibility study per the purchase contract. Typical contracts allow you 60-90 days to determine if the parcel is suitable for you. The ideal situation is to delay closing until such time that you have a formal building permit in hand for your project. However, based on the permitting process turnaround times at the County level, this may not be possible as the seller may not agree. The County is taking anywhere from 8-14 months, subject to the completeness of your application and complexity of your project. That doesn't include the time needed to prepare the application and reports by your service providers.

If you already own the property and you have the time, processing the formal building permit is the standard practice. However, it is helpful, early in the process, to obtain an indication from the County whether your concept will be approved for a formal building permit. Therefore, an RPA or Grading and Tree Removal Permit should be in your initial steps.

If you are on the waterfront, processing the RPA or Grading Permit before you spend tens of thousands of dollars on architectural work is your best option. At this point, new construction on the waterfront is just too complex and burdened with regulations and rules that you need to understand prior to opening your wallet wide open.

In San Juan County, permit requirements for individual parcels of land vary significantly depending on geography. Factors such as proximity to shorelines, wetlands, or steep slopes influence County regulations. As mentioned above, parcels near marine shorelines fall under the Shoreline Master Program, requiring additional environmental review. Likewise, land within critical areas, such as wetlands or wildlife habitats, must meet stricter development guidelines to protect the environment.

Zoning and land use designations also affect permit requirements. A rural residential parcel may have different set-back and density rules than one designated for agriculture or forestry. Sloped or geologically hazardous areas require geotechnical assessments to ensure stability before construction. These geographic differences mean that even neighboring parcels may face different permitting processes, highlighting the need for site-specific analysis before development.

Residential Pre-Application

The Residential Pre-Application (RPA) with the County is a conceptual approval of the footprint for the residence under the rules that exist at the time of review. While the RPA report is non-binding on the County, constructive reliance can be used for planning your new home including the home site, setbacks, tree removal, location for the driveway, and well and septic, if applicable. This is a valuable tool to utilize upfront so that your design team and contractor have solid direction from the County early in the process.

If you are attempting to purchase the parcel, unfortunately, the RPA process is taking up to 9-12 months to get approval from the County due to shortages of staff and backlogs. In the past, we were able to obtain the approval of the RPA within our typical 30-90-day feasibility study as contained in the purchase contract, but now we can only get the prospective buyer confidence, but nothing in written form from the County. Due to the timing delays, this is no longer your best option if you are purchasing.

If you have the time as you own the property, your designer or architect may process the RPA for you as...

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Residential Pre-Application (RPA) vs Land Grading Permit - San Juan County
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<https://www.sanjuanislandslifestyle.com/blog>



IN TOWN WATER VIEW CONDO
\$1,550,000 - LISTING ID 2334078



WATERFRONT HOME WITH DOCK
\$2,800,000 - LISTING ID 2324533



WATERFRONT CABIN ON ACREAGE
\$3,450,000 - LISTING ID 2255443



BROWN ISLAND WATERFRONT HOME
\$1,965,000 - LISTING ID 2333272



CHARMING HOME NEAR TOWN
\$635,000 - LISTING ID 2279299



CHARMING HOME NEAR TOWN
\$635,000 - LISTING ID 2279299



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Listed for \$349,000 | Listing ID 2192805
 Approx. 6.34 wooded acres with half interest in well, 4-bed septic design, utilities close to building site, & portion of a pond. Beautiful picnic or camping only spot at the top of the property with expansive water views.



Listed for \$3,180,000 | Listing ID 2306149
 West-facing Waterfront Home 4031 sf, primary on main floor, living room with wood-burning fireplace, a grill, remodeled kitchen, new roof in 2019, extra deep 3-bay garage with a 1023 sf studio above, +/- 95 ft shoreline.



Listed for \$14,950,000 | Listing ID 2255472
 Waterfront overlooking Haro Strait & Olympic Mtns; 3.2 acres & 368 ft of shoreline, great room with floor to ceiling river rock fireplace, main primary suite, home theater, water view guest suite, 1165 sf guest cottage.



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