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BEFORE YOU SIGN

COMMERCIAL SPACE CHECKLIST

Ask these questions before you sign a lease or LOI. The answers can change your budget, your schedule, and whether the space works for your business at all.

> You don't need to know what every answer means. Write down what the landlord tells you and bring it to your consultation. We'll walk through it together.

1. ASK THE LANDLORD ABOUT THE SPACE

- [ ] **What was the space used for before?**
  Why it matters: If you're changing how the space is used (for example, retail to restaurant), the building code may require upgrades like more restrooms, fire walls or sprinklers. This can add significant cost.

- [ ] **Are there existing drawings or as-builts of the building and suite that would be available before or after you sign?**
  Why it matters: Existing drawings save time and help us spot problems early.

- [ ] **Is the building sprinklered? Is there a fire alarm system?**
  Why it matters: Some uses and sizes require sprinklers or a fire alarm. Adding them to a building that doesn't have them is one of the most expensive surprises.

- [ ] **HVAC: how many units, how old, what size, and who maintains or replaces them?**
  Why it matters: Older or undersized units may need to be replaced, especially for restaurants, salons and gyms. Know who pays before you sign.

- [ ] **What size is the electrical service, and is there room for more?**
  Why it matters: Kitchens, salons and shops use a lot of power. Upgrading the electrical service can be costly and slow, since it often involves the power company.

- [ ] **Is natural gas available to the suite?**
  Why it matters: Many kitchens need gas for cooking equipment. Bringing in a new gas line adds cost and time.

- [ ] **Water and sewer size; is there a grease trap or interceptor? (Restaurants)**
  Why it matters: Most restaurants are required to have one. Adding one usually means cutting the floor or digging outside.

- [ ] **How many restrooms are there, and are they accessible (ADA)?**
  Why it matters: Your type of business and number of people decide how many restrooms you need. Upgrading them for accessibility may be required as part of your work.

- [ ] **Can we add roof penetrations or rooftop equipment (hood exhaust, new HVAC)?**
  Why it matters: Kitchen hoods and new HVAC go through or on the roof. Some landlords limit this or require their own roofer, which affects cost.

2. CHECK THE LEASE AND THE MONEY

- [ ] **What is landlord work vs. tenant work? Get the work letter in writing.**
  Why it matters: The work letter spells out what the landlord provides and what you pay for, in most leases it's typically one of the exhibits at the end. If it isn't in writing, plan on it being yours. If the lease says "as-is" it's all yours.

- [ ] **Is there a tenant improvement (TI) allowance? How much, and when is it paid?**
  Why it matters: This is money the landlord puts toward your build-out. It's often paid after construction, so you may need to cover costs first. This money is used to upgrade the tenant space for things that help the landlord in the future and you now. Many of the upgrades you have to do actually helps them, if they aren't giving a tenant improvement allowance you should question if it's worth it.

- [ ] **When does rent start? Does the free-rent period allow time for design, permits and construction?**
  Why it matters: Design, permits and construction all take time. If rent starts before you can open, you're paying for a space you can't use yet. Having drawings and a permit within a couple weeks is not realistic.

- [ ] **Who pays permit, tap and impact fees?**
  Why it matters: Permit and utility fees can be significant, especially for restaurants.

- [ ] **Does the landlord need to approve drawings and contractors? How long does that take?**
  Why it matters: Many landlords review your drawings before you can apply for a permit, which adds time to your schedule.

- [ ] **Does the lease set a deadline for submitting drawings to the landlord, or a time period for their review?**
  Why it matters: A set of drawings takes several weeks to complete. If the lease gives you a deadline, reach out to us as soon as you sign (or before) so you don't lose weeks and miss it.

- [ ] **What are the signage rules and approval process?**
  Why it matters: Most centers have sign rules, and signs usually need their own permit.

3. ZONING AND APPROVALS

- [ ] **Are you changing the use of the space? (For example, retail to restaurant, or office to salon)**
  Why it matters: A change of use can trigger new zoning requirements, like more parking, landscaping or other site upgrades, on top of building code changes.

- [ ] **Is your use allowed in this zoning district?**
  Why it matters: Zoning decides what kinds of businesses can operate at an address. If yours isn't allowed, you may need special approval, or the space won't work.

- [ ] **Will you need health department approval? (Food service, salons, daycares)**
  Why it matters: These businesses need health department plan approval in addition to the building permit, which adds steps and time.

- [ ] **Is there enough parking for your use?**
  Why it matters: Some businesses, like restaurants, require more parking. Not enough parking can hold up your approvals.

4. OTHER THINGS TO KEEP IN MIND

Notes, not questions. Keep these in the back of your mind as you tour spaces.

The building

- **Older buildings** may have asbestos or lead paint that needs testing before demolition, which adds cost and time.
- **The floor:** new plumbing usually means cutting the concrete slab.
- **Ceiling height** matters for kitchen hoods, racking, signage and the look you want.
- **Structure:** heavy equipment, rooftop units, racking or storage may need the floor or roof checked and a structural engineer (we would hire them as part of the consultant team)
- **Exits:** larger crowds (restaurants, gyms, event spaces) may need a second exit.
- **Accessible entry:** steps, narrow doors or no accessible path from parking can mean added work.
- **Walls between tenants:** restaurants and assembly spaces may need fire-rated walls.

The property and neighbors

- **Open permits or code violations** on the property can hold up your project.
- **Flood zones, historic districts and design overlays** bring extra approvals and design rules.
- **Neighbors:** think about noise and smells (a restaurant next to a salon or office), shared hallways and shared restrooms.
- **Deliveries:** loading access, dumpster location, and where a grease bin would go.
- **Utilities:** are they on separate meters, or shared with other tenants?
- **Outdoor seating** may not be allowed, or may need its own approval.

In the lease

- **Use clause:** how your allowed use is worded matters. Too narrow can block what you plan to do.
- **Exclusive-use clauses:** some centers allow only one of a kind (for example, one coffee shop).

- **Landlord requirements:** approved contractors, insurance levels, and work hours (some require night-only construction).

Industrial and warehouse

- **Truck access** and loading docks.
- **High stacked storage:** above certain heights, extra sprinkler requirements apply.
- **Hazardous materials:** storing or using them brings special rules.

5. BRING TO YOUR CONSULTATION (IF YOU HAVE IT)

- [ ] Address and suite number; approximate square footage
- [ ] Lease, LOI or landlord work letter
- [ ] Photos of the space
- [ ] Equipment list (kitchen, salon, lab or shop equipment)
- [ ] Seating or number of people you're planning for
- [ ] Target opening date and budget range

6. YOUR PROJECT TEAM

Your architect designs the space, coordinates the engineers, prepares the permit drawings and helps with code questions.

Your general contractor is licensed and hired by you. They price and build the project, pull the building permit, manage the trades and schedule inspections.

You make the big decisions: the lease, your contractor, and the choices that shape your space. Every choice has to meet code, so we'll check what you'd like, and if something won't work, we'll explain why and help you find an option that does.

Questions? Schedule a consultation — we'd love to hear about your project.

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