OTTAWA STONEWORK

Permits & Licences

When masonry work touches the City's permit lists: structural repairs, new or wider openings and lintels, entrance steps, heritage properties, and the hardscaping licence's wording

5 Expert Answers from Masonry IQ

ottawastonework.com/construction-brain

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Q1

What does minor repairs mean in Ottawa's hardscaping licence?

The City's hardscaping licence by-law (By-law 2026-222) carves out "minor repairs or minor alterations" from the licence requirement, but we found no definition of what that phrase covers in the by-law or in any City guidance we reviewed.

That gap matters in practice. The licence applies to businesses installing or altering hard landscaping features on private property, with the by-law naming steps, walkways and patios as examples of covered features. A full rebuild of brick steps may fall within that scope. A single cracked tread or a loose stone reset is harder to place. Without a definition, there is no reliable way to say where the line falls between a minor repair and work that needs the licence.

The City can draw that line. Before work starts, ask the contractor directly whether they hold the City hardscaping licence and whether they consider the job a minor repair that falls outside it. Then confirm with the City whether the scope of work you are describing counts as a minor repair under the by-law. The City publishes a list of current hardscaping licence holders, which you can check independently.

If the licence does apply, the 2026 fee is $319 and the licence expires each October 31. The City's licence page lists its insurance and other requirements.

One line worth checking in any quote: ask whether disposal of old masonry material is included, since that cost can appear or disappear between an estimate and a final invoice.

Q2

Are brick steps covered by Ottawa's hardscaping licence?

Brick steps are named in the City of Ottawa's hardscaping licence by-law, so they can fall under it. The by-law covers businesses installing or altering hard landscaping features on private property, and lists steps explicitly among the named features.

The licence itself costs $319 for 2026, expires each October 31; the City's licence page lists its insurance and other requirements. That said, the by-law carves out an exemption for "minor repairs or minor alterations," and we found no definition of what counts as minor. A full replacement of a flight of steps reads differently than patching a single tread, but the City decides where the line falls, not the contractor and not this site.

A few other things are worth knowing before work starts on entrance steps. The City's guidance on landscaping materials providing access to a building says a permit can be triggered where a structure provides access to the building or where there is more than 600 mm difference in elevation between adjacent surfaces. Entrance steps provide access to the building. The Building Code also requires that foundations for exterior steps go below frost depth; ask the contractor how the base is supported below grade. On zoning, steps and landings at or below the first floor may project into a front yard to a minimum setback of 0.6 m from the lot line under Zoning By-law 2026-50, though some properties may also be subject to By-law 2008-250, with the more restrictive applying; confirm with the City.

If the property is designated or in a heritage conservation district, heritage approval may be required before any work that affects heritage attributes, and the exemptions that apply to other properties do not apply.

Before signing anything, ask the contractor directly whether the job requires the City hardscaping licence, and ask the City whether a repair of your scope counts as a minor alteration. The paperwork to have in hand before work starts: a written contract setting out the full scope and price, a WSIB clearance certificate if you want one (valid for up to 90 calendar days), and confirmation of the contractor's City hardscaping licence where the job is not a minor repair.

Q3

Bulging brick wall repair in Ottawa: does the City need a permit?

A bulging brick wall can raise a structural question, and the short answer on permits is: ask the City of Ottawa before any work begins.

Under the Building Code Act, "construct" includes any material alteration or repair of a building, and a repair can be construction under that definition. The City's permit page lists structural repairs and alterations as permit-required work. Rebuilding or stabilizing a bulging wall section may fall in that category; the City decides. Repointing and brick replacement are not on either the City's required or exempt list, but a bulging wall is not a simple repointing job, so the standard exemptions do not settle the question here.

A few things shape what the City will want to know. If the wall is veneer, the ties connecting it to the frame are relevant; the Code sets maximum tie spacing and requires corrosion-resistant straps. Either way, a mason looking at the wall can describe what they see, but the structural assessment and the permit question are two separate conversations.

If the property is designated under the Ontario Heritage Act or sits within a heritage conservation district, heritage approval is a separate step from a building permit, and the City's heritage staff need to be consulted before work starts.

Here is how to sequence the calls. Start with a mason or a structural engineer to get eyes on the wall and a clear description of what has moved and why. That assessment gives you something concrete to bring to the City's building permit staff, who can tell you whether a permit is required for the specific scope of work. If the property has any heritage designation, contact the City's heritage staff at heritage@ottawa.ca at the same time, because heritage approval does not substitute for a building permit and the two processes run in parallel. Getting the permit question answered before signing a contract saves everyone time.

Q4

Is a heritage property exempt from Ottawa permit exemptions?

No: on a designated heritage property, the City of Ottawa's permit exemptions do not apply. The City states plainly that "Designated Heritage Buildings or buildings located within a Heritage District Overlay are not subject to exemptions."

That means work you might do on an ordinary house without a building permit, such as landscaping, still requires a permit on a designated property if it meets the definition of construction under the Building Code Act. Under that Act, "construct" includes "to do anything in the erection, installation, extension or material alteration or repair of a building," so even a repair can be construction requiring a permit.

Heritage approval adds a separate layer. Under the Ontario Heritage Act, a Part IV designated owner shall not alter the property in a way likely to affect its heritage attributes without council's written consent. In a heritage conservation district, no owner shall alter any part of the property other than the interior without a heritage permit, except for minor alterations described in the district plan. The City notes that heritage approval does not meet the requirements for a building permit: you may need both, separately.

Some district plans do carve out routine maintenance from the heritage permit requirement. The Centretown and Minto Park plan, for example, lists "regular ongoing maintenance such as repointing and foundation repairs using heritage methods and materials" as not requiring a heritage permit. The Wilbrod/Laurier and Daly Avenue plans carry a similar maintenance exemption. If your property is in one of the other 17 districts, check your district's plan or contact the City's heritage staff at heritage@ottawa.ca. For a Part IV designated property, check your designation by-law.

For the building permit side, repointing, brick replacement and stone wall repair are not listed on the City's exempt projects list, nor on its permit-required list. The guidance is to ask the City directly at buildingpermits@ottawa.ca. For any structural repair or rebuilding of a wall section, it may be construction under the Act; ask the City before work begins.

Before any quote is accepted, ask the mason whether the work as quoted needs a heritage permit, a building permit, both or neither, and who will apply.

Q5

When do Ottawa stone steps at an entrance need a permit?

Entrance stone steps can trigger a building permit in Ottawa. The City's advisory on landscaping materials providing access to a building sets out two clear triggers: where the structure provides access to the building or serves a required egress, and where there is more than 600 mm difference in elevation between adjacent surfaces.

Natural stone is treated as a landscape material under that advisory, so stone steps at a front door sit squarely in scope. A structure greater than 1 m in height also requires a Part 4 design under the advisory's terms. Those three conditions can overlap, and any one of them can be enough to bring a permit into play.

There is also a foundation question the Building Code raises directly. Section 9.8.9.2.(3) says the depth below ground level for foundations for exterior steps must conform to Section 9.12, which covers frost protection. Ask the mason how the steps are supported below grade and whether that detail is part of the scope of work.

On zoning, Zoning By-law 2026-50 section 204 allows steps and landings at or below the first floor to project into front and exterior side yards to a minimum setback of 0.6 m from a lot line. Some properties may also be subject to Zoning By-law 2008-250, with the more restrictive of the two applying. Confirm both with the City.

If the property is a designated heritage building or sits within a heritage conservation district, the exemptions that might otherwise apply do not: designated heritage properties are not subject to permit exemptions.

A few things worth confirming in any written quote for stone steps:

- whether the contractor will determine if a permit is needed, and who pulls it
- how the steps are supported below frost
- where the matching stone comes from and how joints are detailed
- cleanup and disposal of the old steps

Start with the City's building permit staff at buildingpermits@ottawa.ca, because they can tell you whether your specific steps need a permit before any work begins, and that answer shapes everything else, including whether a Part 4 design is needed.

Disclaimer: This guide is provided for informational purposes only by Ottawa Stonework. It does not constitute professional advice. Always consult qualified contractors and your local building authority (the City of Ottawa) before starting any fence project. Fences in Ottawa must meet the City's Fence By-law, and a free locate is required before digging any post hole. Information is current as of November 15, 2026 and may change. Visit **ottawastonework.com** for the latest answers.