



# Retaining Wall Planning Checklist

For a San Diego-area retaining wall: what to measure and note before anyone visits, the permit questions to ask, and a side-by-side check of what each written estimate names. Look and measure from the yard. Don't climb on, dig at or probe a wall that is leaning or moving; if it has moved and people or a building are at risk, keep everyone back.

## 1. MEASURE AND NOTE

- ☐ Length \_\_\_\_\_ ft  
Include returns and steps; note each tier separately.
- ☐ Visible height, tallest point \_\_\_\_\_ ft  
Permits measure from the top of the footing, which sits below the ground.
- ☐ What the wall is built from  
Interlocking block, concrete block, poured concrete, stone, timber.
- ☐ Lean, bulge, cracks or gaps at the top  
Photograph from the same spots each time, with the date.
- ☐ What is below the wall  
Walkway, patio, driveway, a neighbor's yard or a building.
- ☐ Old permits, plans or a soils report for the wall or the lot

## 3. WATER

- ☐ Downspouts that empty near the top of the wall
- ☐ Sprinklers or drip lines watering the top
- ☐ Puddles at the top after rain
- ☐ Weep holes or pipe outlets at the base or ends  
Note whether they look open, buried or stained. Just look.
- ☐ Water, mud or staining on the face or at the bottom

## 2. THE LOAD ABOVE (surcharge)

- ☐ Within a distance about equal to the wall's height, is there:
- ☐ A driveway, parking or a road
- ☐ A house, garage, pool, deck or shed footing
- ☐ A fence or railing on or near the top
- ☐ A slope that keeps rising behind the wall  
Backfill steeper than 1.5:1 counts as surcharge in the City of San Diego.
- ☐ Room for equipment to reach the wall  
Gate width, steps and slopes on the way in.

## 4. PERMIT QUESTIONS

- ☐ Who issues the permit for this address?  
City of San Diego Development Services, County of San Diego PDS for unincorporated areas, or another city's building division.
- ☐ Is the wall over 3 ft from the top of the footing, or holding a surcharge?  
Either one means a building permit in the City and the County. Other cities set their own rules.
- ☐ City standard design, or engineered plans?  
The City standard covers block walls up to 6 ft without surcharge, expansive soil or mapped hazards.
- ☐ Is a soils report required for the mapped geology?
- ☐ Coastal Development Permit, grading or right-of-way permit?

## 5. WHO IS DOING THE WORK

| Check                                                                                                                                                                                                                             | Estimate A | Estimate B | Estimate C |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------|------------|------------|
| <b>California contractor license number</b><br>Look it up with the Contractors State License Board at <a href="http://cslb.ca.gov">cslb.ca.gov</a> . The minor-work exemption covers only jobs under \$1,000 that need no permit. |            |            |            |
| <b>Classification fits the wall</b><br>For example C-29 masonry for block and stone, C-8 concrete for poured walls, or a general (A or B) class where it fits the contract.                                                       |            |            |            |
| <b>Proof of insurance, and who designs an engineered wall</b><br>Engineered walls are designed by a California-licensed civil or structural engineer or an architect.                                                             |            |            |            |

## 6. WHAT EACH WRITTEN ESTIMATE SHOULD NAME

| The estimate states                                                                                                                                      | Estimate A | Estimate B | Estimate C |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------|------------|------------|
| <b>Wall type and system</b><br>Segmental block, reinforced block, poured concrete, stone; gravity or reinforced.                                         |            |            |            |
| <b>Length and height, measured from the top of the footing</b>                                                                                           |            |            |            |
| <b>Footing or base, and how deep it sits</b>                                                                                                             |            |            |            |
| <b>Drainage behind the wall</b><br>Clean gravel, a perforated pipe at the base, and where the water exits.                                               |            |            |            |
| <b>Geogrid layers and their length</b><br>For segmental walls that need them; this sets how far back the dig goes.                                       |            |            |            |
| <b>The load above, accounted for in the design</b>                                                                                                       |            |            |            |
| <b>Engineering and a soils report</b><br>Included, separate, or not needed, and why.                                                                     |            |            |            |
| <b>Permit: who applies, and whether the fees are included</b>                                                                                            |            |            |            |
| <b>Inspections</b><br>Footing, block and steel before grout, drainage before backfill, final; plus any special inspections an engineered plan calls for. |            |            |            |
| <b>Excavation, access and haul-off</b><br>Machine or hand-carry, soil export, and removal of an old wall.                                                |            |            |            |
| <b>Backfill and compaction</b><br>Imported material if the site soil can't be reused.                                                                    |            |            |            |
| <b>Fence, railing, planting and irrigation</b><br>Removed and put back, or excluded.                                                                     |            |            |            |
| <b>Hidden conditions</b><br>How rock, buried debris or an old footing found in the dig is priced, and that you approve it first.                         |            |            |            |
| <b>Schedule, exclusions and payment terms</b>                                                                                                            |            |            |            |
| <b>Total</b>                                                                                                                                             |            |            |            |

## WORTH A SECOND LOOK

- A crack filled or the face patched on a wall that is leaning or moving along its length.
- No drainage behind the wall mentioned at all.
- "No permit needed" for a wall that holds a driveway or a steep slope.
- A price with no length, height or wall type written on it.
- No license number, or a classification that doesn't match the wall.
- Pressure to decide on the spot, or a large payment before work starts.

### Notes