

Rules of Thumb: First Unit Cowboy Church Buildings

If you are in Texas, regardless of whether you are in or out of the City limits, the following regulations apply: All assembly buildings (churches) must comply with the State Building Code, State Energy Code, Texas Accessibility Standards, State Septic System and Water Well Regulations. State law requires an architect and engineer's seal on construction documents for any building with an assembly occupancy (seating capacity) of more than 50 people.

1. Overview

The building needs to be relevant to the culture; for example, a barn, an expo center, an open metal building with concrete floors with a rustic look. The building should be as open as possible with plenty of space. It should provide easy access to the outside. Pre-engineered steel buildings are typically the structure of choice.

2. Free-Span Buildings

A free span building is critical. (No columns to block views and versatility for future remodeling.) When constructing a pre-engineered steel building, make sure the "X" wind bracing cables or struts are not located in walls you intend to remove in order to extend the building in the future.

3. Two-Story Buildings

All two-story buildings with second floor space used by people, require two stairways (fire rated exits) and an elevator per state law.

4. Accommodate the Disabled

A. Doors to all accessible areas must have at least a 32" clear opening. A door at least 36" wide is required.

B. Accessible buildings may have no steps between accessible parking spaces and the building interior.

C. Sidewalks must be at least 3 feet wide and have a slope no greater than 1 inch per 20 inches of sidewalk. When sloped, there must be a level platform 5'-0" long at both ends of slope.

D. Ramps must be at least 3 feet wide, with a maximum slope of 1 inch per foot of ramp. A level platform 5'-0" long is required at both ends of the ramp and for every 30' of ramp. All ramps above ground level must have hand rails.

E. Stair risers must be no more than 7" high. Treads must be at least 11" deep. Handrails must be 34" to 38" high and extend 12" beyond top riser and at least 12" plus the width of one tread beyond the bottom riser.

F. Accessible toilet stalls must be 5 feet square (minimum) with a 32" wide door opening, with handrails 33" to 36" above the floor at the back and side of the toilet, clearing the wall 1½". The top of the water closet seat must be 17" to 19" above floor level. In addition, toilet rooms must have a clear space 5 feet in diameter (to turn a wheelchair).

G. Accessible parking must be clearly marked and adjacent to an accessible entrance. Spaces must be at least 9 feet wide and have a 5 foot wide aisle to one side.

H. Professional assistance is imperative. Knowledge of applicable codes is necessary to create legally accessible facilities.

5. Design Considerations

A. Add an overhead, roll-up (garage type) door in addition to the required life safety exit doors. This allows for the movement of larger equipment for special events.

B. Use windows for cross ventilation.

C. Use chairs and/or benches instead of pews.

D. Two to three risers to the platform are usually enough for good visibility in a first unit building. Consider building the platform of wood that is screwed together. You can then disassemble and relocate it at a later date.

E. The sound booth should be on the ground floor, near the center at the back of the assembly room. There should be 3 or 4 risers up to the booth to provide good visibility for the media operators.

F. The foyer should be as large as possible. Two to five square feet per person is recommended.

G. If dedicated kitchen space is not affordable in the Phase 1 budget, consider a bar with several power outlets along its length in place of a kitchen.

H. Plan separate storage for band equipment and for other church equipment (such as tables, chairs, etc.).

I. Create at least 2 teaching units for preschool and children. The dimensions for each room should be at least 12' x 15'.

J. Consider creating large protected outdoor spaces attached to the building, such as covered porches, deep overhangs, etc.

K. The State Energy Code will require certain levels of energy efficiency in the building, but pay special attention to roof and wall insulation. Good insulation will help keep utility costs down, freeing more dollars for ministry, and creating a more comfortable building.