

DNR Pier Planner

April 2026



The DNR Pier Planner follows ch. 30 Wisconsin Statutes and ch. NR 320, Wisconsin Admin. Code. The Planner is for waterfront property owners to design and place a new pier that does not require a DNR permit. All existing piers and wharves initially placed in the water by April, 2012, do not need authorization from the DNR. If your pier is exempt, you do not need to contact DNR before placement.

Do I Need a Permit to Place an Existing Pier?

An existing pier or wharf that was initially placed before April 2012 is exempt and does not need a DNR permit. An exempt legacy pier may continue to have the same number of boat slips.

Do I Need a Permit to Place a New Pier? How Many Piers Can I Place?

Placement of a new pier is exempt and does not need a DNR permit if it follows the specific dimensions and requirements described below. Some municipalities have local pier ordinances, which may have other restrictions or require local permits. Please contact your local zoning office to review any local restrictions. Wisconsin law does not regulate the number of piers or wharves that may be placed on a shoreline.

Who May Place and Use Piers?

Only a riparian (waterfront property owner) may place a pier or wharf. Friends, neighbors or a contractor may assist with installation and maintenance, but owners are responsible for following requirements, obtaining any necessary permits, and for maintenance after construction. The waterway is public, but piers, boat lifts and related structures are the private property of the riparian.

Where Can I Place My Pier?

Piers, wharves and moored boats must be placed in the “exclusive riparian zone”, which is the space in the water adjacent to the riparian property where the riparian has the exclusive right to place structures. Two potential methods used to determine the “exclusive riparian zone are shown below in Figure 1. See s. NR 320.08, Wis. Adm. Code, for more methods. Note that DNR does not get involved in private riparian zone disputes between neighbors.

How Many Boat Slips Can I Have on My New Pier?

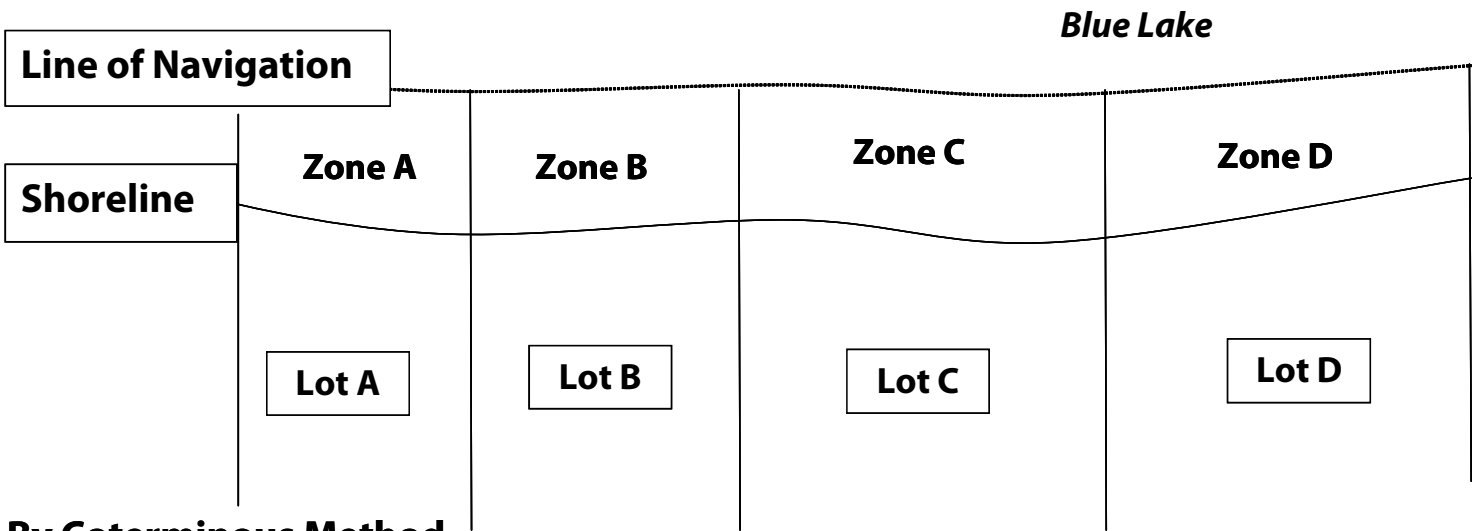
The number of boat slips – the total of all watercraft docked at a pier or wharf including boats in a boat lift or hoist - is two boat slips are allowed for the first 50 feet of shoreline owned and one for each additional full 50 feet of shoreline owned. In addition to the boat slip allowance a riparian owner can secure up to 2 personal watercraft for the for the first 50 feet of the riparian owner’s shoreline frontage and one additional personal watercraft for each additional full 50 feet of shoreline.



Figure 1. Riparian Zones

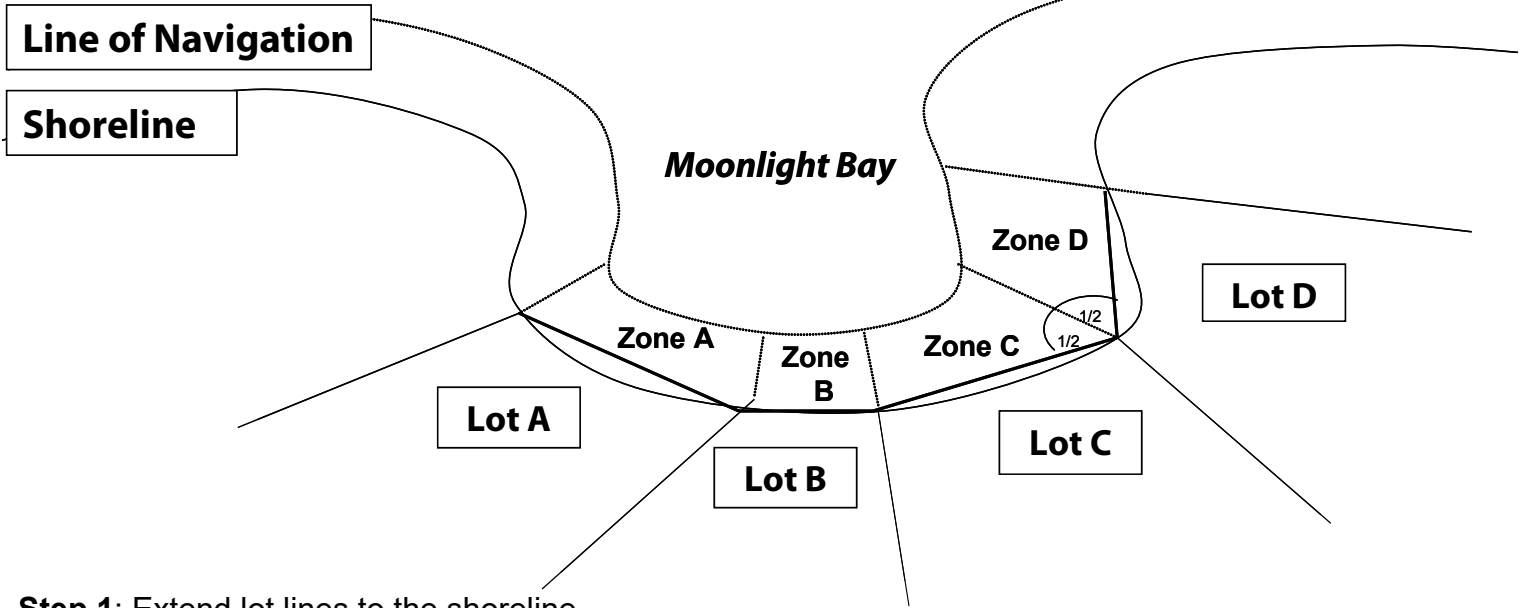
By Extension of Lot Lines...

For relatively straight shorelines and lot lines



By Coterminous Method...

For curved, irregular or angled shorelines or lot lines



Step 1: Extend lot lines to the shoreline

Step 2: Connect the points found in Step 1 to create chord lines.

Step 3: Bisect the angles formed by the chord lines in half (shown between Lots C&D)

What Are the Dimensions of an Exempt Pier or Wharf?

- ✓ A pier may extend out to the 3-foot water depth, as measured at summer low levels, or to adequate depth for mooring a boat or using a boat lift or boat hoist. A pier may also extend out to a DNR-approved municipal pierhead line. See *Figure 2* above.
- ✓ Six feet is the maximum width allowed for any portion of a pier or wharf. This width allows safe loading of gear and passengers.
- ✓ The surface area of the loading platform must not exceed 200 square feet. See *Figure 3* below.
- ✓ Piers may be placed in a variety of configurations, including straight, or with a "T" or "L". Catwalks, finger piers or similar features may be used for access to boat slips, as long as they meet the size limits above. A pier may not enclose or isolate any part of a waterway.

Figure 2. Pier Length

A pier may extend into the water as far as A, B, or C - whichever is further from shore:

A – the 3-foot water depth, as measured at summer low levels.

B – where there is adequate depth for mooring a boat, or using a boat hoist or boat lift.

C – the municipal pierhead line (if one is established by a local ordinance).

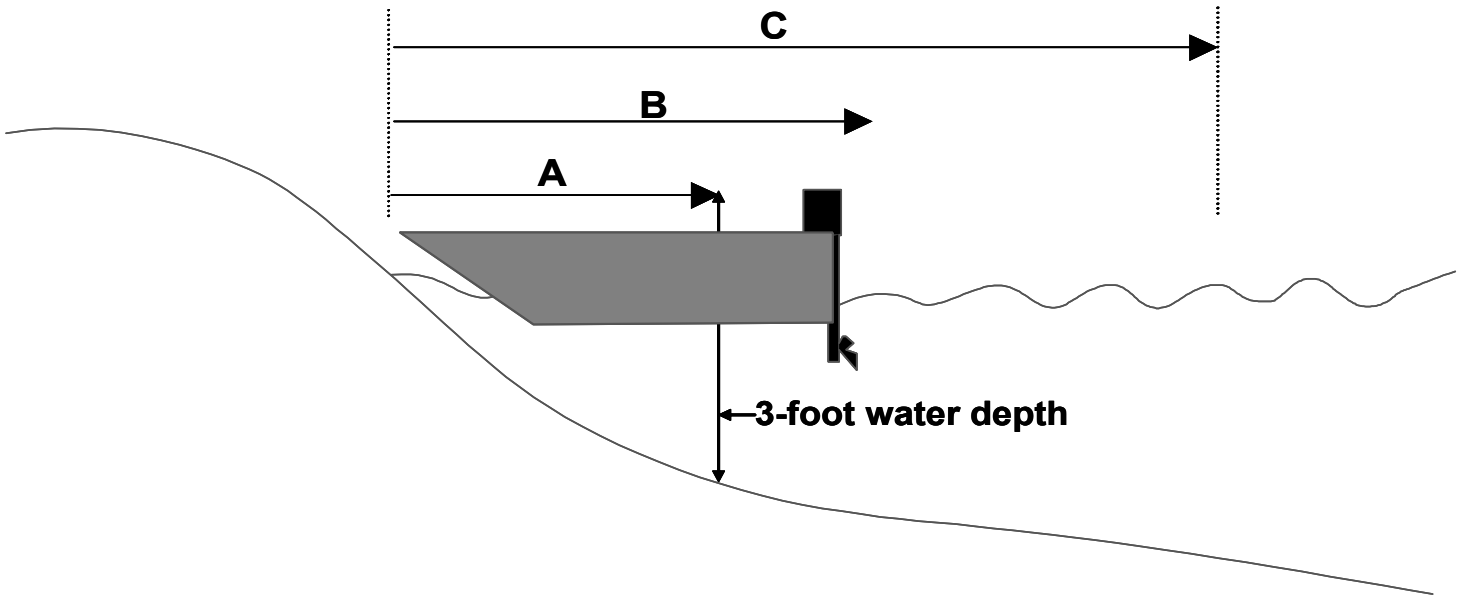
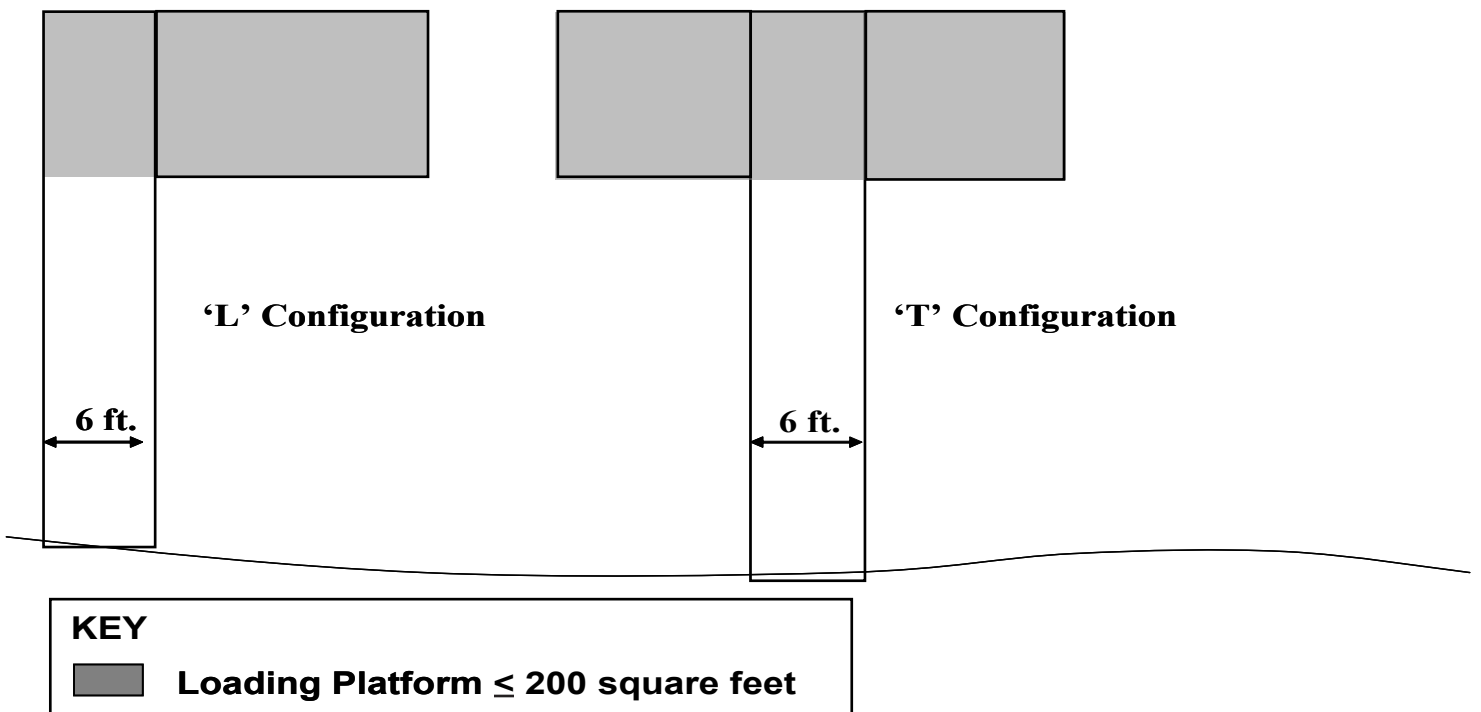


Figure 3. Pier Width

A pier or wharf can be a maximum of 6-feet wide. A pier can have a loading platform as part of the pier. The surface area of the platform cannot exceed 200 square feet (length x width). The width is the shortest horizontal distance.



How Should My Pier or Wharf Be Constructed?

- ✓ A pier or wharf may not obstruct the free flow of water or include any features which trap or accumulate aquatic plants or sediment.
- ✓ A pier or wharf must be floating or placed on piles or posts.
- ✓ Polystyrene floats must be coated or contained to resist gas, oil and abrasion. Metal and plastic drums must be free of any product residue and corrosion resistant. Solid piers on fill and piers on rock-filled timber cribs or similar foundations required a DNR individual permit, and are only authorized in specific waterways under limited circumstances.
- ✓ Piers may be placed in a variety of configurations, including straight, or with a "T" or "L". Catwalks, finger piers or similar features may be used for access to boat slips, as long as they meet the size limits above. A pier may not enclose or isolate any part of a waterway.

Can I Place Other Structures Near the Shoreline?

Boat lifts, hoists and shelters

- ✓ Seasonal boat shelters, which may contain a boat lift or hoist, are exempt from permitting if they meet the standards in s. NR 320.04 (9). For example, size is limited to 14-feet wide by 30-feet long. Boat shelters may have a roof or canopy but may not have sides or walls, and the boat shelter – including the roof, canopy and any supports – must be removed seasonally between December 1 and April 1 to be exempt. Boat lifts and hoists can remain in place year round.
- ✓ A permanent boat shelter requires a DNR permit and must meet standards in NR 320. Permanent boat shelters are not allowed on lakes and flowages less than 500 acres, or on rivers except the Mississippi River, the Wolf River (from Lake Butte des Morts to the upstream limits of the Village of Fremont), and the Fox River (from the DePere Dam to Lake Winnebago).

Boathouses

- ✓ Boathouses differ from boat shelters by having sides or walls.
- ✓ On land - boathouses above the ordinary high water mark (OHWM) are exclusively for watercraft storage and are regulated by local ordinances. Contact your municipal building inspector or zoning administrator.
- ✓ Over water - boathouse construction is prohibited waterward of the OHWM. Boathouses constructed over water prior to 1979 are allowed to remain but their repair and maintenance are restricted and require DNR approval. See "boathouse repair" on the DNR website for more details.

Mooring Buoys

- ✓ Generally, you may place a standard mooring buoy in your riparian zone of interest within 150 feet of the OHWM with-out a DNR permit. Local ordinances may require permits. Consult your municipality or local Conservation Warden for more information.

Swimming Rafts

- ✓ A riparian may place a properly anchored swimming raft or water trampoline within 200 feet of shore.
- ✓ No permit is needed for a swimming raft or water trampoline as long as the size is no greater than 200 square feet and does not exceed 38-inches in height, or is removed from the water each night.
- ✓ Swimming rafts and water trampolines placed in DNR-designated swimming areas, such as for municipal beaches or private campgrounds, may be placed without a permit and do not have size limitations.
- ✓ In all cases, the raft or trampoline must be confined to your riparian zone of interest and may not interfere with public rights in the waterway. Keep it as close to shore as possible to avoid interfering with boat traffic.