EPEX CONSULTING

FREE GUIDE

Before You Sign Anything.

Before you sign a lease, commit equity, or hire a contractor for your first build, run these twelve questions — **the ones first-time owners, investors, and franchisees most often skip.**

12
QUESTIONS

4
DECISION AREAS

100%
OWNER-SIDE

The cheapest place to catch a problem is on paper. Run these before a single dollar of construction money is committed.

HOW TO USE THIS CHECKLIST

Ask them out loud. Before you sign.

Most construction mistakes don't happen in the field. They happen weeks earlier — in the lease, the proposal, the budget, and the schedule. **By the time a problem shows up on site, it's already expensive to fix.**

You don't need to become a construction expert to protect yourself. You need to ask the right questions before you sign, and know what a straight answer sounds like. Take these twelve into your next conversation with a contractor or a lender. If an answer comes back vague, that's not a small thing — it's the first place a project starts to drift.

On paper

NOT ON SITE

A **project review** applies all twelve questions directly to your budget, proposal, lease, and schedule — with someone on the owner's side before you commit the money.

HOW TO MARK EACH ITEM

- ☑ **Check the box** if you got a clear, specific answer.
- ☐ **Leave it blank** if the answer was unclear, missing, or "I think so."
- ○ **Circle it** if the answer was vague or a flat no. That's where you're most exposed.

01 SECTION 01

The Money Questions

A budget is a story told in numbers. Before you believe it, find out what was left out, lumped together, or carried at last year's price.

- [ ] **1. Is this a fixed price, and what exactly is it fixed to?**

A price is only as firm as the drawings it's based on. If the plans are 60% done, a "fixed" price is really a guess with a number attached.

> **A good answer** names the specific plan set and date, and explains how gaps get priced — not "don't worry about it."

- [ ] **2. What's in the budget that I can't see yet?**

The line items first-timers miss are almost never the building itself — they're permits and impact fees, utility connections, builder's risk insurance, testing, and general conditions.

> **A good answer** produces a line for each. A missing line today is a change order tomorrow.

- [ ] **3. How much contingency is in here, and who controls it?**

A contingency that's too thin won't survive first contact with reality. One that's vague becomes a slush fund.

> **A good answer** gives a percentage that fits the project's risk and states that contingency draws require your sign-off.

- [ ] **4. Where did these unit prices come from — this year or last?**

Trade pricing moves. A budget built on last year's numbers, or a bid from a sub who won't hold the price, fails in month four.

> **A good answer** distinguishes firm quotes from allowances, and dates them.

RISK FLAG

A budget with no contingency and lumped trade costs is not a budget. It's an opening bid for change orders.

02 SECTION 02

The People Questions

Everyone else in the room does this every day. The question is who, if anyone, is in the room for you.

- [ ] **5. Can this contractor actually carry this project right now?**

A good contractor with too much work is a scheduling risk you inherit. Ask about current workload, crew depth, and balance sheet — not just the portfolio.

> **A good answer** is specific about capacity. Evasiveness here is worth more than a low bid.

- [ ] **6. Who is protecting my interests — and are they independent?**

Your architect represents the design. Your contractor represents the build. Neither is a substitute for someone whose only job is to watch the numbers, the schedule, and the paperwork on your behalf.

> **A good answer** makes clear who is owner-side and who is not.

- [ ] **7. What does the payment process actually look like?**

Money should follow verified progress, not invoices alone. Ask how draws work: who verifies percent-complete, how lien waivers get collected, and what the lender's inspector requires before funding.

> **A good answer** describes a documented process. "We'll figure it out as we go" is how draws stall.

RISK FLAG

If no one at the table is owner-side, you are the owner's representative — on your first project, against people on their hundredth.

03

SECTION 03

The Paperwork Questions

The documents are boring right up until they're the only thing standing between you and a lien on your property.

- [ ] **8. Are lien waivers being collected from everyone, every draw?**

An unpaid subcontractor can file a lien against your property even after you've paid the general contractor. Conditional and unconditional waivers — from the GC and every sub — are the chain that protects you.

> **A good answer** treats waiver collection as routine and non-negotiable, not an afterthought.

- [ ] **9. Does the schedule of values match the real work?**

The schedule of values is the map your whole project is funded against. If it's front-loaded or doesn't match the field, it invites lender scrutiny on every future draw.

> **A good answer** welcomes you — or your advisor — reviewing it line by line before the first draw.

- [ ] **10. What happens at permit — and could the energy code stop us?**

For commercial and multifamily work, code items — including energy-code (comcheck) compliance — routinely catch projects at permitting. First-timers discover this the hard way.

> **A good answer** names the permitting authority, a realistic timeline, and the code items most likely to cause a rejection.

RISK FLAG

A missing lien-waiver chain and a front-loaded schedule of values are the two paperwork gaps that cost owners the most, the quietest.

04

SECTION 04

The Timeline Questions

A schedule is a promise about the future. Find out whether it's a plan or a hope — and what has to be true for your exit to work.

- [ ] **11. Is this schedule real, or is it a hope?**

A believable schedule has actual trade durations and sequencing, not a straight line to a move-in date. Ask what it assumes about weather, inspections, and long-lead materials.

> **A good answer** can walk you through the critical path and where it's most fragile.

- [ ] **12. What has to be true for my exit to work?**

Whether you're refinancing, selling, or opening a franchise location on a date, the whole point is what happens after construction. Ask, on paper, what the numbers and the calendar must hit — before you commit the money.

> **A good answer** connects the build back to your goal. If no one can answer this, the plan isn't finished yet.

RISK FLAG

A move-in date with no critical path behind it is a marketing number. Your lender, your investors, and your opening depend on the real one.

THE BOTTOM LINE

If you could only do one thing.

Projects fail in the gap between what was **assumed** and what was **confirmed.** These twelve questions exist to close that gap — across the money, the people, the paperwork, and the timeline.

If you can't answer every one with confidence on your own, you have two options:

1. **Slow down.** Don't sign, hire, or release money until each question has a straight answer.
2. **Bring in someone who has done it before.** A second set of eyes on the owner's side is the cheapest insurance you can buy on a project that costs hundreds of thousands of dollars.

Clean answers to all twelve put you ahead of most first-timers — whether you're an owner, an investor, or a franchisee opening your first location.

NEXT STEP

Book a Project Review

A focused, owner-side review of your budget, contractor proposal, scope, lease, and schedule before construction money is committed — the same twelve questions, applied directly to your project. You receive a written summary and a recommendation call.

Starting at $1,500

This review can potentially save you thousands of dollars — sometimes tens of thousands — in overruns, missed costs, and avoidable mistakes.

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Construction mistakes cost thousands. A review costs an afternoon.

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