

Code Compliance

— guidelines on Seattle regulations governing safety and quality of life

Unsafe and Vacant Buildings:

- SDCI's Inspection Program
- SFD's Inspection Program

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The Seattle Department of Construction and Inspections (SDCI) and the Seattle Fire Department (SFD) both have programs affecting vacant buildings. This Tip contains general information about these programs. For more specific information, please contact us at (206) 615-0808.

Reporting Unsafe Structures

Call 911 in an emergency, such as a fire or when you observe criminal activity affecting the structure. Otherwise, call SDCI to file a complaint about a building with suspected structural problems. If possible, contact the property owner first, and then call our Violation Complaint Line at (206) 615-0808. Your complaint should be as specific as possible so that we can locate and assess the building.

We will visit the property, after you file your complaint with us, to evaluate the condition of the structure. In some cases we will require further review by the owner's structural engineer. If the building or a portion of a building is found to be an imminent danger to life or property, we will require the property owner to secure the structure immediately and take measures to correct the dangerous condition.

SDCI's Vacant Building Inspection Program

Vacant buildings are problems for any neighborhood. Boarded-up or neglected vacant buildings are unsightly and can attract dumping, graffiti, or activities such as drug dealing or unlawful occupancy. We work with Public Health - Seattle & King County, the SFD, and the Seattle Police Department (SPD), to identify and coordinate an effective response to serious vacant building

problems. These problems may include cleaning up yard debris, closing the building to entry, or even ordering demolition. You can obtain information about a specific building and our actions regarding that building by contacting us at (206) 615-0808 during business hours. You will be referred to the vacant building inspector handling that building or you can file a complaint at that time if it is new to us. You can find additional property information at www.seattle.gov/sdci/resources/property-and-building-activity.

It is not illegal for a building to be vacant, but owners must keep the building closed to unauthorized entry. In addition, owners must comply with maintenance standards so that the premises are clear of junk and overgrown vegetation. Also, they must maintain the exterior, including stairs, porches and yard areas. We inspect for violations of these standards and take enforcement action when they are present. Although some vacant buildings have interior violations such as an accumulation of junk, we do not have the authority to enter buildings to inspect such violations without the owner's permission.

Our first step when we receive a complaint about a building in violation of vacant building standards is to contact the owner to ask them to fix the violations. If an owner does not fix the violations after a warning, we issue a Notice of Violation which gives the owner a defined period of time to correct the problems. In some cases, for example if the building is open to entry, we will issue an Emergency Order with a much shorter timeline. In that case, we may ask a City work crew to secure the building if the owner does not correct the problem by the deadline. We may refer the file to the City Attorney's office to seek civil penalties if the owner doesn't comply and correct the violations.

We place properties that are not brought into compliance after a complaint or have multiple complaints, and buildings in the development process that are vacant pending demolition, on our vacant building monitoring program. We inspect these buildings monthly and owners are charged fees ranging from \$261.40 to \$571.75 per month based on the condition of the building. Properties must have no violations for three consecutive monthly inspections to be removed from the program.

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We encourage owners to explore ways to keep buildings occupied while waiting for permits to be issued.

We also have an administrative process to determine if a building is unfit for human habitation or other use in cases of extreme deterioration and in some cases will order the building to be demolished under that process. See Tip 608, *Regulations Affecting Buildings Unfit for Human Habitation or Other Use*, for more information on this process.

SFD's Building Inspection Program

Firefighters inspect every occupied commercial building annually or biennially, depending on the use of the building. Multifamily residential buildings, schools, and hospitals are also included in this inspection program. The walk-through inspection covers all portions of each building except the interior of private dwelling units.

The inspector checks for fire code violations such as general fire hazards, blocked or hindered egress, the use of special processes that may require permits, proper installation of fire systems, and changes in use of the building that might require that special precautions be observed or permits obtained.

If violations are found, they are noted and a copy given to the owner or responsible person with a time frame (generally two weeks) in which the violations are to be corrected. Any items that are SDCI related are referred to SDCI. At the end of the time period allotted, a reinspection takes place. If the violation has not been corrected, the violation is forwarded to the Fire Marshal's Office (FMO) to initiate action for compliance. A fee will be charged if an inspector from the FMO has to reinspect the premises.

SFD's Vacant Building Inspection Program

Firefighters annually inspect all known vacant commercial and residential buildings. The purpose of the inspection is to ensure that the building is secured against illegal entry, that hazardous conditions such as holes in walls or flooring are covered and secured, that combustible materials are removed, and that the building address is clearly posted. Such inspections are important, since vacant buildings are frequently the target of arson or fires started by persons who have illegally gained entry into a building.

Access to Information

Links to electronic versions of SDCI **Tips**, **Director's Rules**, and the **Seattle Municipal Code** are available on our website at www.seattle.gov/sdci. Paper copies of these documents, as well as additional regulations mentioned in this Tip, are available from our Public Resource Center, located on the 20th floor of Seattle Municipal Tower at 700 Fifth Ave. in downtown Seattle, (206) 684-8467.