

Code Compliance

— guidelines on Seattle regulations governing safety and quality of life

City Regulations for Maintaining Vacant Buildings

Updated November 3, 2023

Our Housing and Building Maintenance Code (HBMC) includes provisions for the maintenance of vacant buildings. These standards require owners of vacant buildings to maintain them in the interest of public safety and preservation of housing and neighborhoods.

While it is legal for a building to be vacant, we do not allow owners to leave a building open to unauthorized entry. There are special requirements for maintenance to protect and allow entry to City employees such as firefighters and others. Other requirements are focused on preventing the building from deterioration from the elements and on keeping the grounds clear and free of junk, graffiti, and overgrown vegetation.

Who is Responsible for Vacant Building Safety and Maintenance?

The building owner is responsible for maintaining the building and premises in accordance with our codes and regulations, regardless of provisions of any agreement with any tenant, manager or operator. We typically contact the owner or owners of record when a vacant building site is inadequately maintained or is open to entry. If a property is found to be in violation of vacant building standards, it will be enrolled in our vacant building monitoring program to ensure compliance (see Tip 601 for more information). If a dangerous condition remains unaddressed, we may have the building boarded up or the yard cleaned at the owner's expense. The City may refer unpaid fines to collections or bring legal action to collect these amounts, and abatement cost may be levied as a special assessment which becomes a lien against the property.

General Building Standards

Standards which apply to all buildings, vacant and occupied, are those which require the removal of hazardous substances, infestation, litter, garbage, and overgrown vegetation from the property. Outdoor storage of inoperable vehicles, materials, and appliances is not allowed.

How to Secure a Vacant Building Against Unauthorized Entry

A vacant building may be secured simply by locking doors and windows. However, if the window glass is broken or missing or doors and locks are not secure, building owners must install plywood, metal, or hardened polycarbonate coverings, firmly screwed and bolted in place, or other equivalent protection. Detailed standards for securing the building are found in the HBMC. One operable door must be maintained into the building. Owners will need to go beyond the minimum standards for buildings that are repeatedly broken into.

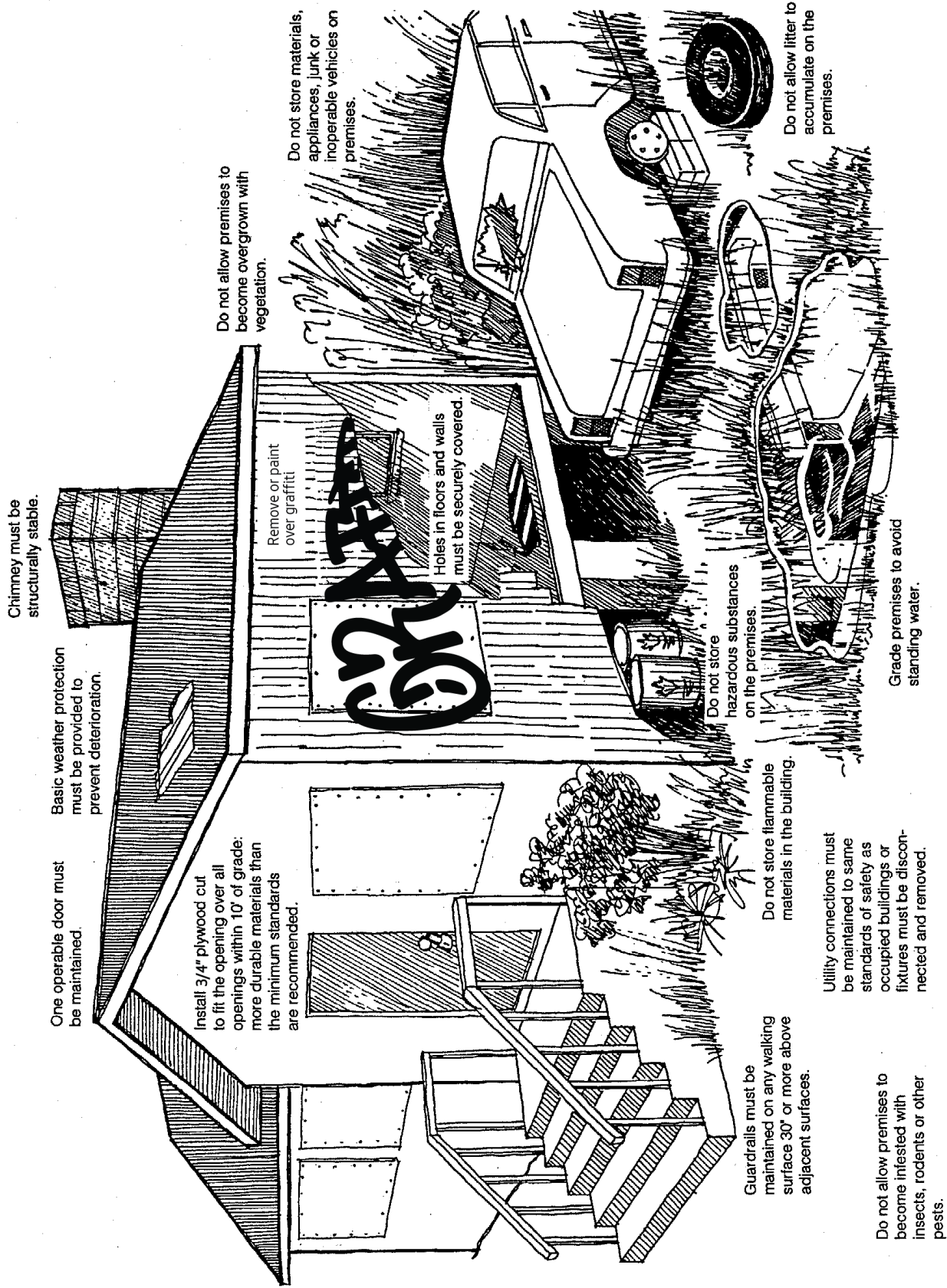
Utility Service Standards

You must **either** maintain the utility connections in your building to the same standards of safety and operability as those in occupied buildings, **or** remove fixtures and connections completely and terminate your utility service.

Fire Safety Regulations

Fire is always a risk in vacant buildings. You may not store flammable materials, including litter and debris and items such as gasoline or oily rags, in vacant buildings. Firefighters must be able to safely access the building and the interior must also be safe for anyone who enters the building. You should cover holes in floors and walls. The Seattle Fire Code has additional standards for vacant buildings.





Chimney must be structurally stable.

Basic weather protection must be provided to prevent deterioration.

One operable door must be maintained.

Install 3/4" plywood cut to fit the opening over all openings within 10' of grade; more durable materials than the minimum standards are recommended.

Remove or paint over graffiti

Holes in floors and walls must be securely covered.

Do not allow premises to become overgrown with vegetation.

Do not store materials, appliances, junk or inoperable vehicles on premises.

Do not store hazardous substances on the premises.

Do not allow litter to accumulate on the premises.

Grade premises to avoid standing water.

Do not store flammable materials in the building.

Utility connections must be maintained to same standards of safety as occupied buildings or fixtures must be disconnected and removed.

Guardrails must be maintained on any walking surface 30' or more above adjacent surfaces.

Do not allow premises to become infested with insects, rodents or other pests.

Outside the Building

You must provide basic weather protection to prevent deterioration which means there should not be broken windows or other openings in the building envelope and roofs and gutters should be in good repair. The premises must be graded and drained to eliminate standing water. You also must clear overgrown vegetation. Your premises must be free of litter or junk storage, including inoperable vehicles. Parking is not allowed at vacant properties. Buildings must be kept free of graffiti. Certain building components such as front stair assemblies may be removed altogether if they have become so deteriorated that they would pose a danger to City personnel, such as firefighters, or to the general public.

Are there Rules About Reoccupying a Vacant Building?

If a building is vacant and has been the subject of a Notice of Violation or an Emergency Order, or if it was occupied but was vacated after issuance of an Emergency Order that required the occupants to move out, the building cannot be re-occupied by a renter until:

- A city inspection is completed
- All violations are corrected
- The building meets all minimum standards for occupied housing
- A Certificate of Compliance is issued to the owner

The only exception to this standard is for an owner who reoccupies a single-family detached dwelling and does not correct the violations but rents no rooms to others.

What Can I Do About a Vacant Building Open to Unauthorized Entry in My Neighborhood?

Call us at (206) 615-0808 to complain about vacant buildings. You may also submit a complaint online at <https://cosaccela.seattle.gov/portal/>. Call the police if you observe criminal activity at the site, at 911.

Access to Information

Links to SDCI Tips, Director's Rules, and the Seattle Municipal Code are available on our website at www.seattle.gov/sdci.