

# Vacant Building Monitoring Report



**Seattle** Department of  
Construction & Inspections

Seattle City Council  
Planning, Land Use, and Zoning Committee  
September 5, 2018

# SDCI PURPOSE AND VALUES

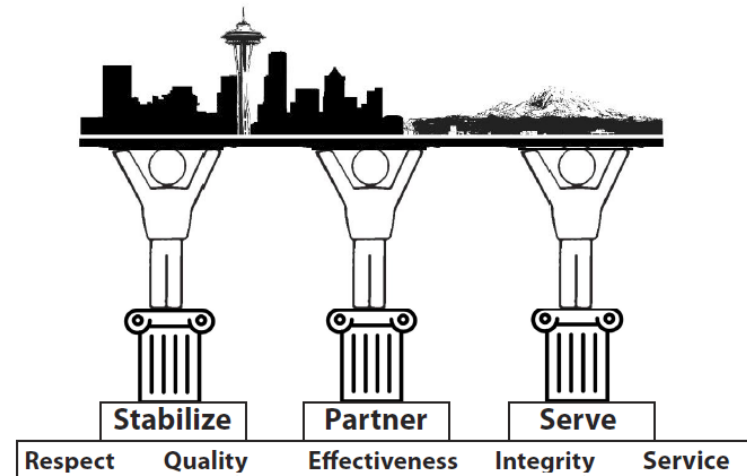
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## Our Purpose

As stewards and regulators of land and buildings, we preserve and enhance equity, livability, safety, and health of our communities.

## Our Values

- Respect
- Quality of work
- Equity
- Integrity
- Service



# REPORT BACKGROUND

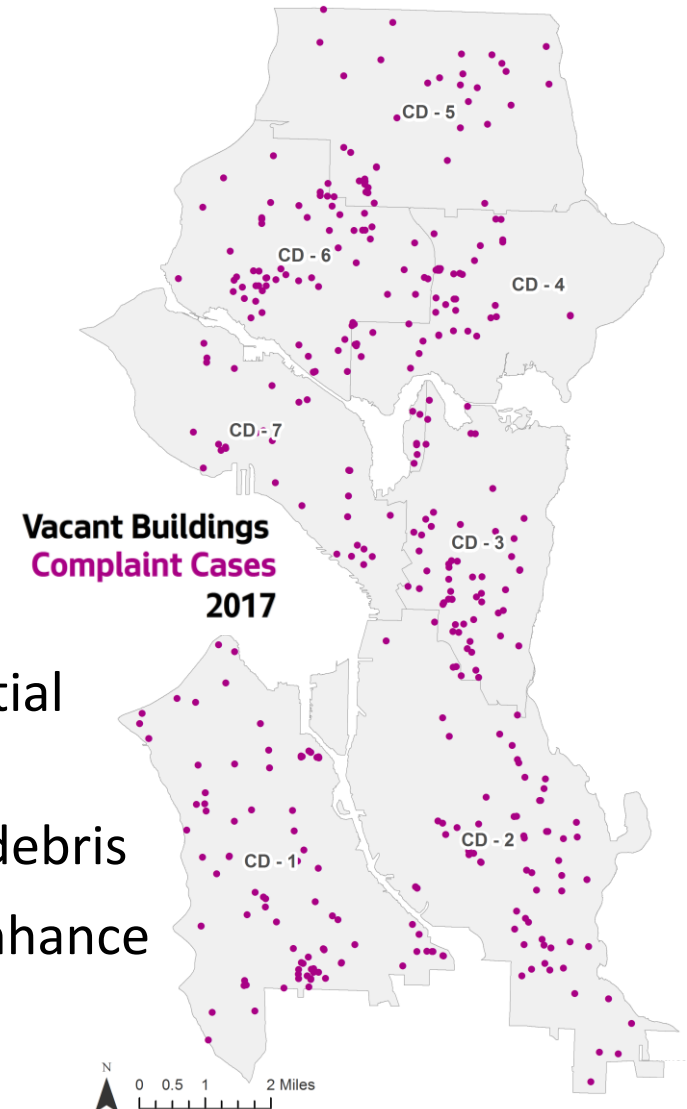
## Problems with Vacant Buildings

- 55% increase in complaints since 2013
- 6x increase in open/entered buildings\*

## 2017 Legislation

- Strengthened maintenance standards related to securing a vacant building
- Reduced barriers to demolishing residential structures
- Clarified provisions for cleaning up yard debris
- Required a report on policy options to enhance the monitoring program

\*Measured by Emergency Orders to Close





# REPORT BACKGROUND

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## Recent Successes

- Better coordination with other agencies
- More aggressive with orders to clean and close  
11 unfit orders requiring demolition in 2018  
14 in the queue  
(7 in 2017, 1 in 2016)



# RACIAL EQUITY

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## Considerations from 2017 legislation:

- Vacant building complaints are fairly evenly distributed throughout the city
- Building owners who are economically disadvantaged are more likely to struggle with the costs to maintain their property, fees, and penalties
- Staff use what flexibility and resources may be available to help minimize negative impacts to the most vulnerable



# REPORT BACKGROUND

## Topics

- 1 Enrollment
- 2 Minimum maintenance standards
- 3 Penalty structure
- 4 Tiered fee structure
- 5 Building evaluation process
- 6 Temporary caretaker program



### Enhancing SDCI's Vacant Building Monitoring Program

Report to Council  
April 2018

#### Report Background

In September 2017, the City Council adopted [Ordinance 125389](#), which modified the maintenance and demolition standards for vacant buildings. The ordinance strengthened maintenance standards related to securing a vacant building, reduced barriers to demolishing structures formerly used for housing, and clarified provisions for cleaning up yard debris. In Section 5 of the ordinance, the Council requested that the Director of the Seattle Department of Construction and Inspections (SDCI) submit a report with policy options to enhance vacant building monitoring efforts.

At a minimum, the report was asked to cover:

1. Triggering events for enrollment or registration in the program;
2. Minimum maintenance standards for vacant buildings, which may include use of higher grade materials, such as polycarbonate sheets or security panels, or other strategies to preserve the appearance and condition of the structure;
3. A revised penalty structure for failure to comply with maintenance standards;
4. A tiered fee structure for monitoring to allow for cost recovery while minimizing costs for participants whose buildings are well maintained and not subject to unauthorized entry; and
5. Authority for the SDCI Director to create a standardized/uniform/streamlined building assessment or valuation process for Chapter 22.208 of the Housing Building and Maintenance Code (HBMC);
6. Authority of SDCI Director to establish a complementary program whereby owners of vacant buildings may elect to have those buildings occupied by temporary caretakers who are unheated or face barriers to housing and are identified as potential caretakers by a human services provider or similar organization.

#### SDCI Recommendations

SDCI is committed to reducing the public safety impacts of vacant buildings and to maximizing opportunities to address Seattle's housing shortage. As such, SDCI recommends the following approach, based on the policy options discussed in this report:

- Modify business practices to enroll more properties in the vacant building monitoring program. Specifically, enroll properties in redevelopment in the program if they are in violation of the minimum maintenance standards for vacant buildings.
- Continue to promote the caretaker model through business practice improvements. Work with organizations who are interested in proactively reaching out to developers with potential soon-to-be-vacant residential properties. Share permit application information with these organizations in order to support their outreach efforts, and to help keep good-quality housing in use.
- Explore other ways to identify vacant but habitable buildings that could be used to house people and to incentivize developers to keep good-condition buildings occupied during the redevelopment process.



# 1 ENROLLMENT

## Background

- 43 properties enrolled in the vacant building monitoring program
- Enrolled when a violation of maintenance standards is left uncorrected
- Enrolled properties are visited every three months
- Properties undergoing redevelopment not usually enrolled
- Most problematic buildings are not enrolled in quarterly monitoring program, but get visited much more often due to ongoing issues



Enrolled in  
monitoring program

Image: Google Street View



# 1 ENROLLMENT

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## Policy Options

Enroll vacant buildings with:

- A. Complaints
- B. Any/all violations
- C. In redevelopment with violations
- D. Health/safety issues
- E. No complaints/violations – in redevelopment
- F. No complaints/violations – upon vacancy
- G. No complaints/violations – at foreclosure





# 2 MAINTENANCE STANDARDS

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## Background

- Address the condition of the structure and property, require the building to be secured from unauthorized access
- SDCI can require higher standards case-by-case
- Small issues sometimes overlooked
- Staff must sometimes use discretion



# 2 MAINTENANCE STANDARDS

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## Policy Options

- A. More aggressively enforce current standards  
(Business Practice)
- B. Strengthen certain standards for all buildings
- C. Raise standards for problem buildings
- D. Raise standards for buildings that are vacant  
for a long time



# 3 & 4 FEES & PENALTIES

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## Background

- No charges for most code compliance inspections
- Quarterly monitoring charge ranges from \$250-\$500 per visit, are not always paid
- City clean-up or closure can cost thousands
- Possible civil penalties for unaddressed violations



# 3 & 4 FEES & PENALTIES

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## Policy Options

- A. Explore ways to improve cost recovery
- B. Lower monitoring charge for complying properties
- C. Raise monitoring charges  
(escalating, repeat problems, hourly billing authority, etc)
- D. Increase frequency of monitoring
- E. Raise civil penalties for violations
- F. Explore other ways to disincentivize vacancy



# 5 BUILDING VALUATION

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## Background

- Inspections provide general information about condition
- Two ways SDCI can order an “unfit” building to be repaired or demolished
  - 1 detailed financial evaluation process
  - 2 building has a history of break-ins /dangerous activity
- Both still require a hearing process with opportunity for owner to contest/appeal

↪ New process with 2017 legislation





# 5 BUILDING VALUATION

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## Policy Options

- A. Explore ways to simplify valuation process (technology, etc)
- B. Create a new/alternate process for worst cases
- C. Explore ways for property owner to self-report condition
- D. Explore possibility of mandating a more detailed inspection



# 6 TEMPORARY CARETAKER PROGRAM

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## Background


- Voluntary program where property owners are connected with non-profits
- Caretakers placed in good-quality vacant housing
- SDCI promotes, does not administer
- Opportunity for property tax waiver from King County

## Policy Options

- A. Continue to promote
- B. Explore regulatory incentives or requirements
- C. Explore other ways to keep housing occupied




# 6 TEMPORARY CARETAKER PROGRAM

**Seattle Department of Construction & Inspections**


**DO YOU HAVE A BUILDING THAT MAY BECOME VACANT?**

**YOU HAVE OPTIONS**  
KEEP YOUR BUILDING OCCUPIED UNTIL YOU'RE READY TO DO SOMETHING ELSE WITH IT

**1**  
**KEEP YOUR TENANTS**


You may be able to keep a tenant in your dwelling unit. SDCI staff has options for keeping tenants in a property and timing the end of their tenancy to coincide with permit issuance.

**CONTACT: SDCI Property Owner & Tenant Assistance**  
Jessica Long - [jessica.long@seattle.gov](mailto:jessica.long@seattle.gov)

**2**  
**HOUSE AN ARTSPACE**

Artists and arts organizations are often looking for studio spaces, community event spaces, structures for classes, and more!

**CONTACT: Seattle Office of Arts & Culture**  
Matthew Richter - [matthew.richter@seattle.gov](mailto:matthew.richter@seattle.gov)

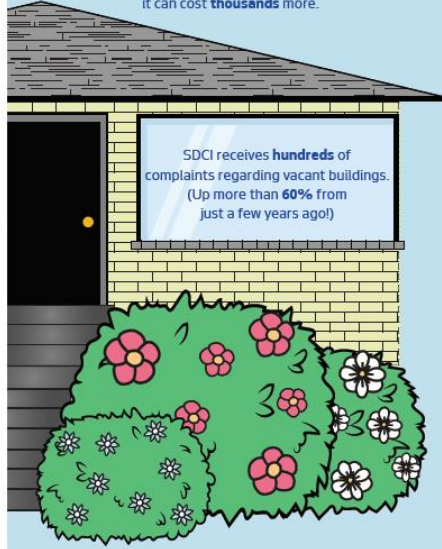
**3**  
**HOST A CARETAKER**

Some Seattle-based non-profits will place caretakers in homes that are still in good shape. They ensure your property is maintained safely and securely.

**FOR EXAMPLE:**  
[Mary's Place](http://marysplaceseattle.org) - [marysplaceseattle.org](http://marysplaceseattle.org) | [Weld Seattle](http://Weld Seattle) - [weldseattle.org](http://weldseattle.org)

Fees for monitoring a vacant building can exceed **\$1,200/year**.

If the City cleans up or closes your property for you, it can cost **thousands** more.



SDCI receives **hundreds** of complaints regarding vacant buildings. (Up more than **60%** from just a few years ago!)

Many vacant buildings have been **entered illegally**.

**READ MORE:**  
**Tip 601**, Unsafe and Vacant Buildings: SDCI's Inspection Program/SFD's Inspection Program  
**Tip 605**, City Regulations for Maintaining Vacant Buildings  
**Tip 608**, Regulations Affecting Buildings Unfit for Human Habitation or Other Use

**QUESTIONS? WE CAN HELP!**

700 Fifth Ave., Suite 2000  
P.O. Box 34019  
Seattle, WA 98124-4019  
Call the complaint line at (206) 615-0808  
[seattle.gov/sdci](http://seattle.gov/sdci)

New Resource



# SDCI RECOMMENDATIONS

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Committed to reducing the public safety impacts of vacant buildings and maximizing opportunities to address Seattle's housing shortage

- Modify business practices to enroll more properties in the vacant building monitoring program
- Continue to promote the caretaker model through business practice improvements
- Explore other ways to identify vacant but habitable buildings that could be used to house people and to incentivize developers to keep good-condition buildings occupied during the redevelopment process



# QUESTIONS?

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## SDCI Contacts

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