

A panoramic view of the Seattle skyline featuring the Space Needle, various skyscrapers, and Mount Rainier in the background under a clear blue sky. The foreground shows green trees.

Vacant Building Ordinance

Photo by John Skelton



Seattle Department of
Construction & Inspections

Land Use Committee
September 13, 2023

SDCI PURPOSE AND VALUES

Our Purpose

Helping people build a safe, livable, and inclusive Seattle.

Our Values

- Equity
- Respect
- Quality
- Integrity
- Service

BACKGROUND

- The Housing and Building Maintenance Code requires vacant buildings to be secured against unauthorized entry and be free of junk and overgrown vegetation. In 2019, Council approved legislation establishing the Vacant Building Monitoring (VBM) program to help ensure compliance.
- Properties that fail to meet vacant building standards, those with development applications, and dangerous buildings reported by SPD or SFD are placed onto SDCI's VBM program.
- Properties enrolled in the VBM are inspected monthly for compliance with building safety and maintenance standards. Monitoring ends after three consecutive inspections without a violation.



WHY CHANGE IS NEEDED

SDCI has seen an increase in vacant building activity

- 41% increase in unsecured vacant buildings from 2021 to 2022
- 57% increase in secured with safety or maintenance violations from 2021 to 2022
- 2023 violations on pace to exceed last year's numbers

Vacant Building Monitoring fee non-payment is up

- Fee collection rates have fallen from 57% in 2019 to 37% in 2022
- The current process for collecting unpaid fees requires obtaining a court order, which is time-consuming and resource intensive

Unsecured vacant buildings pose a public safety risk

LEGISLATION OVERVIEW

- Strengthen the standards for securing vacant buildings
- Require vacant buildings on monitoring to be kept free of graffiti
- Require any building that receives a Notice of Violation to enter the vacant building monitoring program, rather than just those buildings that fail to correct a Notice of Violation by the compliance deadline
- Simplify the process for Police and Fire referrals to vacant building monitoring
- Authorize SDCI to file a property lien to collect unpaid vacant building monitoring fees and abatement costs

CHANGES BY SECTION

SMC	Change	Purpose
22.206.200.A.4	Amends the standards for securing vacant buildings to require solid core doors rather than single panel or hollow and 1-inch rather than ½ inch throw deadbolts. Allows the department to require polycarbonate sheets rather than plywood if the Director determines it is necessary to secure the building.	Solid core doors and 1-inch deadbolts are typical for new construction and are more secure against entry. Polycarbonate sheets are more difficult to remove than plywood and provide greater visibility to first responders in the event of an emergency on the premises.
22.206.200.A.4	Adds a new requirement that vacant buildings must be kept free of graffiti.	Minimizing the visibility of vacant buildings can reduce the likelihood of future unlawful entry and deterioration.
22.206.200.F.2	Amends the criteria for a building to be enrolled in the VBM program to any Notice of Violation, rather than a Notice of Violation that is not corrected by the compliance deadline, or two Notices of Violation within a twelve-month period.	A vacant building with a violation, even if corrected, often experiences additional vacant building activity. This change removes the onus from the surrounding neighborhood to continually report problems.

CHANGES BY SECTION

SMC	Change	Purpose
22.206.200.F.2	Removes the requirement that Police and Fire maintain a list of properties that have generated calls for dispatch in order to refer them SDCI for vacant building monitoring.	Eliminate unnecessary redundancy and facilitate greater interdepartmental coordination by allowing SFD and SPD to directly report dangerous buildings without maintaining a separate list from SDCI.
22.206.200.F	Authorizes SDCI to collect VBM fees and abatement costs through a special assessment against the property filed as a lien with the King County Department of Records and Elections; provides requirements for how property owners and identifiable mortgage holders must be notified consistent with state law.	A property lien, or even the threat of a lien, encourages more timely voluntary compliance.
22.206.030.I and 22.206.200	Various clarifications and technical corrections.	Improve the clarity and legibility of the code.

QUESTIONS?

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