

Province Establishes Safety Standards for Secondary Suites

The Alberta government has created new construction and maintenance standards for secondary suites, to help provide Albertans with safe, affordable housing options.

"The need for affordable housing throughout our province is clear, and secondary suites continue to be an increasingly important option for Albertans," said Rob Renner, Minister of Municipal Affairs. "Having specific standards will provide landlords with clear guidelines for suites' safe construction and maintenance, and it will help make sure tenants and their families are safe in their homes."

The new standards follow 12 recommendations from an MLA review committee on secondary suites, which are self-contained living units that include a kitchen, bathroom and separate exit created in a single-family home. The Alberta government accepted the committee's recommendations suggesting province-wide standards be included in the Alberta Building Code and the Alberta Fire Code. Standards include specifications for ceiling heights, windows, fire protection, interconnected smoke detectors, heating and ventilation systems, as well as separate exits.

Building standards for new suites will take effect December 31, 2006, while fire code standards for existing suites will take effect December 31, 2008. These dates ensure that the new suites constructed meet the safety standards, while providing owners of existing suites with two years to bring their properties into compliance with the new code requirements.

Municipalities will continue to choose whether to develop bylaws allowing secondary suites in their communities, as well as deciding which areas may be zoned to permit secondary suites.

The MLA review committee was co-chaired by Moe Amery, MLA for Calgary-East and John Lord, former MLA for Calgary-Currie. Committee members included representatives from the Alberta Urban municipalities Association; the Alberta Association of Municipal Districts and Counties; the Safety Codes Council; and Alberta Municipal Affairs.

The MLA committee report and the secondary suites section of the Alberta building and fire codes will be available on the Municipal Affairs website at www.municipalaffairs.gov.ab.ca

Safety Standards for Suites **Questions & Answers**

Will the standards apply to both new and existing suites?

New suites are required to be built to all the standards in the Alberta Building Code, including the new secondary suite standards. Existing suites will be required to meet the standards under the Alberta Fire Code.

When will secondary suite standards be adopted?

Standards for new suites under the Alberta Building Code will take effect December 31, 2008. This gives owners of existing suites two years to bring their properties into compliance with the new code requirements.

Will municipalities be required to permit secondary suites in their communities?

No. Municipalities will continue to choose whether to develop bylaws allowing secondary suites in their communities, as well as deciding which areas may be zoned to permit secondary suites.

Who was consulted on the new standards?

During initial consultations, the MLA committee heard from members of the public, municipal governments, fire and building code-enforcing authorities, social organizations and the building industry, among others. There was also an online public consultation following the release of the committee's final report in March 2006.

If I have a secondary suite, do I know if it meets building and fire code standards?

Copies of the secondary suites standards will be available on the Municipal Affairs website at www.municipalaffairs.gov.ab.ca To speak to a building or fire code technical advisor, call the Alberta Municipal Affairs Safety Services branch toll-free at 1-(866)-421-6929. With questions about municipal bylaws or zoning, contact your municipality.

Who has the authority to enforce building and fire standards for secondary suites?

Currently, the province, accredited municipalities, and agencies have the authority to enforce building and fire code requirements in their respective jurisdictions.

MLA Review Committee **Recommendations on Suites**

1. Standards for secondary suites should be developed for use in single-family homes to address the need for safety and affordability.
2. The government should establish province-wide standards for secondary suites under the Alberta Building and Fire Codes. Municipalities would continue to have the choice to determine when and where secondary suites will be permitted.
3. Standards for secondary suites should apply to both new and existing homes.
4. Standards for secondary suites should be developed to accommodate the goal of affordability, provided acceptable safety standards are in place.
5. The minimum height of rooms and spaces should be 1.95m or 6'6".
6. Each bedroom should have at least one outside window that can be opened from the inside.
7. There should be no requirement for windows in rooms other than in the bedrooms.
8. To protect the suite from the spread of fire, fire protection for the walls and ceiling should be required.
9. For the purpose of life safety, interconnected smoke alarms between the upper and lower suites should be required for every home with a secondary suite.
10. The furnace should be enclosed with fire separation walls and ceiling.
11. To enhance life safety, there should be a separate exit from the secondary suite to the outside.
12. Heating and ventilation systems should meet appropriate safety requirements that recognize the differences between new homes and existing homes.

How Implementing Secondary Suite Standards Might Look

Government has accepted an MLA review committee's recommendations, which specify province-wide standards to be included in the Alberta Building Code and the Alberta Fire Code.

The costs to develop a secondary suite will vary depending on the conditions of the home, the size and extent of the development and the labour required. The listed costs are approximate estimates for new construction or renovations carried out by a contractor. These types of activities require appropriate permits, such as building, gas and electrical.

Recommendations 1-4 are related to policy and are not technical requirements, and therefore they are not included in the diagram.

5. The minimum height of rooms and spaces should be 1.95m or 6'6". May impose a limitation on some very old homes, but the majority of homes would be suitable. In many new homes, 2.4m or 8' is the standard ceiling height.

6. Each bedroom should have at least one outside window that can be opened from the inside. A window allowing emergency exit/access in the bedroom, including cutting the concrete basement wall and installing the new window well, would cost approximately \$1,300.

7. There should be no requirement for windows in rooms other than in the bedrooms. No cost for current suites and a cost savings for development of new suites. This is no longer a national building code requirement, as it does not relate to safety. While additional windows are not required, they are also not prohibited.

8. To protect the suite from the spread of fire, fire protection for the walls and ceilings should be required. Developing the suite with fire-rated walls and ceilings, including farming and installation of 1/2-inch drywall, partitions, electrical wiring, plumbing rough in, priming and painting, costs approximately \$20 to \$25 per square foot of installation.

9. For the purpose of life safety, interconnected smoke alarms between the upper and lower suites should be required for every home with a secondary suite. Interconnected smoke alarms would cost \$150 for two alarm units in a new home and \$60 for each additional unit. Interconnected alarms in existing homes require more labour to install and would cost up to \$450.

10. The furnace should be enclosed with fire separation walls and ceiling. Both sides of the furnace wall be given 1/2-inch drywall at similar range to recommendation #8.

11. To enhance life safety, there should be a separate exit from the secondary suite to the outside. An exit from the suite, where the stairs leading from the basement to a vestibule and doorway from the main floor level directly to the outside, would range \$4,000 to \$6,000. Alternatively, as in the diagram, a direct exit from the suite could be made by

cutting through the concrete for a doorway to the outside and steps leading up to the ground level, at approximately double the cost. The first option is more affordable, often more practical and would meet acceptable safety standards.

12. Heating and ventilation systems should meet appropriate safety requirements that recognize the differences between new homes and existing homes. There are a variety of heating and ventilation systems to choose from with an equally wide range of costs. Supplemental heating, such as a wall furnace, space heaters, or a fireplace, ranges from \$1,500 to \$3,000. Two furnace systems would range from \$2,000 to \$6,000.

For homes with a pre-existing secondary suite, a single heating and ventilation system would be permitted. Homeowners are encouraged to investigate the use of heating options with their local heating services company to minimize costs.

Total Costs

The total cost of implementing secondary suite standards will vary according to the number and type of changes required to develop the suite. Existing homes may already have a number of the recommendations and standard building code requirements in place, which would lower the cost of development. For existing homes, the total costs may range from \$4,000 to higher.

For new homes, more construction may be required, but the changes may be easier to make due to the benefits of new home design. Secondary suites in new homes may range from \$10,000 to higher. Again, it is important to keep in mind that the total costs may be lower or higher depending on the home and the choice of construction.