

Standards for Secondary Suites

Why is this important?

The increase in the number of secondary or “basement” suites has renewed concerns over the safety of these suites. Secondary suites are a distinct type of housing for which there were no specific safety standards in the Alberta building and fire codes. Secondary suites can be an important affordable housing option, provided they are built and maintained safely.

An MLA Review Committee on Secondary Suites recommended changes to the Alberta building and fire codes to recognize secondary suites as a distinct type of accommodation from apartments or duplexes. Government accepted the recommendations of the committee and amended the current editions of the Alberta building and fire codes. The changes satisfy primary safety concerns while reducing the costs to build or renovate a suite to comply with the building and fire codes.

Standards for secondary suites in the Alberta Building Code came into force on December 31, 2006, and apply to all new construction. Standards under the Alberta Fire Code will come into force December 31, 2008, and will apply to all existing construction. This gives owners of existing suites 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.

Implications for Municipal Land Use Bylaws

If your municipality chooses to permit secondary suites, the building and fire code standards allow a broader range of secondary suites to be in compliance and therefore suitable for development permit approval.

The standards employ specific definitions of the term “secondary suite” and “primary dwelling unit” that may have implications for your land use bylaw. A review of definitions for consistency should be undertaken.

If your municipal land use bylaw does not currently provide for secondary suites, you may wish to consider an amendment. The following tips identify some considerations in amending your land use bylaw:

- **Definitions under the proposed changes to the Alberta building and fire codes:**

Secondary suite means a second, self-contained dwelling unit that is located within a primary dwelling unit where both dwelling units are registered under the same land title.

Primary dwelling unit means a townhouse, row house, single or semi-detached home or duplex.

.../2

March 8, 2007

For further information about secondary suites, contact the Safety Services Branch toll-free at 1 (866) 421 6929, or a planning advisor in the Municipal Services Branch at (780) 427 2225 (to call toll-free within Alberta, dial 310 0000).


Municipal Affairs
and Housing

- **Districts allowed:**

Secondary suites can be considered as either a permitted (a permit must be issued if the application conforms to the land use bylaw in all respects) or a discretionary use. Districts where a secondary suite may be appropriate include single detached residential, low-density infill, semi-detached residential, low-density residential or medium-density multiple family.

Efforts need to be made to ensure that a proposed secondary suite conforms to the building and fire code standards. Regardless of whether a development permit is issued, all secondary suites must comply with the Alberta Building Code, and as of December 31, 2008, the Alberta Fire Code.

Secondary suites must also comply with the *Public Health Act* and the Minimum Housing Standards Regulation. A co-ordinated approach with the disciplines is recommended.

- **Standards to include in providing for secondary suites**

Common concerns with allowing secondary suites in a community relate to the impact of additional vehicles in the neighbourhood and the construction of a second entrance. Consideration should be given to requiring an additional onsite parking space. The appearance of the separate entrance should be co-ordinated with exterior finishing and landscaping of the existing dwelling to meet Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED) requirements (for more information on CPTED, visit the Royal Canadian Mounted Police website at www.rcmp-grc.gc.ca/ccaps/safecomm_e.htm). Consideration should also be given to requiring a covered, lockable storage area for bikes and other yard storage. It may also be appropriate to require separate utility connections or an agreement to separate utility bills.

What Municipal Affairs and Housing will do to assist municipalities

Municipal Affairs and Housing has developed or is in the process of developing assistance for municipalities in encouraging the development of secondary suites, including:

- A template bylaw for adopting secondary suites
- A Homeowner's Guide for Secondary Suites
- Tips and advisories in pamphlets and on the Municipal Affairs and Housing website
- Public sessions about code requirements and best practices
- Technical support for municipalities

ISBN : 978-0-7785-5984-9

March 8, 2007

For further information about secondary suites, contact the Safety Services Branch toll-free at 1 (866) 421 6929, or a planning advisor in the Municipal Services Branch at (780) 427 2225 (to call toll-free within Alberta, dial 310 0000).