

Secondary suite standards

Planning

The costs to develop a secondary suite will vary depending on the conditions of the home, the size and extent of the development and type of changes required to comply with minimum code requirements. Secondary suites are permitted only in specific single family homes in accordance with municipal zoning bylaws.

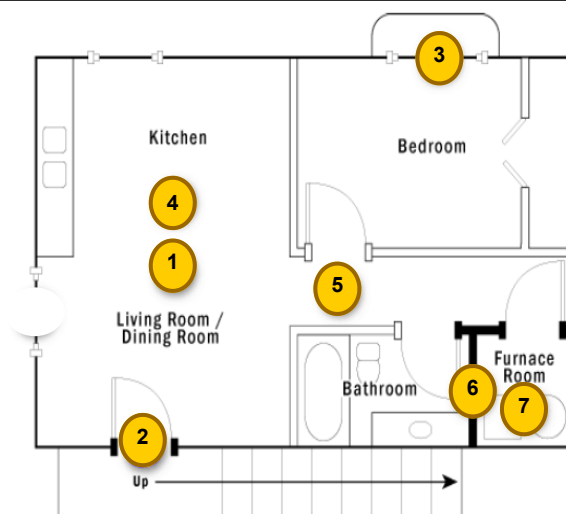
Before homeowners decide to proceed with renovating their homes to incorporate a new or upgraded secondary suite, they should approach their local municipal administration office. They should discuss their plan with a Development Officer or Building Safety Codes Officer and obtain the necessary information regarding permit requirements (e.g. building, gas and electrical work), zoning and other construction considerations.

For complete details, consult the Alberta Building Code and the Alberta Fire Code.

Basic Requirements

The following is an outline of the applicable building code requirements that need to be considered when developing a new or upgraded secondary suite. The Alberta Fire Code contains similar requirements that apply to the upgrading of existing suites by December 31, 2008.

If you need information on specific upgrades for an existing suite, please contact your local municipality. Municipalities decide whether to develop bylaws allowing secondary suites as well as which areas are zoned to permit secondary suite development.



1. The minimum ceiling height for living spaces in a secondary suite is 1.95 m.

This requirement is in line with current acceptable practice for unfinished basements. This height makes it feasible for most existing homes to be adapted for secondary suites. For existing secondary suites, the minimum ceiling height may be less than 1.95 m, subject to evaluation by a safety codes officer.

2. A secondary suite must have a direct exit to the outdoors.

This requirement is an essential safety feature to provide a primary means of evacuating occupants of the secondary suite in the event of fire or other emergency. It is acceptable to have an exit from a basement suite with stairs leading from the basement to a main floor vestibule with a doorway directly to the outside. However, the walls and ceiling for such exits must be provided with protection from the effects of fire to allow occupants adequate time to evacuate.

A direct exit from a basement suite may also be provided by cutting through the foundation for a door to the outside and steps leading to ground level.

3. Each bedroom in a secondary suite must have at least one window for emergency escape during a fire.

Windows in bedrooms are intended to provide occupants with an alternate exit during a fire emergency. A secondary suite may contain a number of bedrooms, and each bedroom must have at least one window with an unobstructed opening size of not less than 0.35 m² and no dimension less than 380 mm. In existing secondary suites, bedroom windows that do not meet this requirement will have to be modified. Tenants must also be able to access the window and any protective enclosure (such as security bars) from the inside, without the use of keys or tools to get to the outside.

4. Provide fire protected walls and ceiling between a secondary suite and the main dwelling unit and around common exits by the use of ½-inch drywall.

This requirement is intended to provide fire protection between suites to allow occupants of either unit time to evacuate before fire spreads between units. When the exit from a basement suite goes through a main floor vestibule to the outdoors, adequate fire protection to the exit walls and ceiling is necessary for occupants to evacuate safely.

5. Homes containing a secondary suite must have interconnected smoke alarms installed to cover both dwellings.

Interconnected smoke alarms provide early warning to occupants when a fire starts in the other suite. Smoke alarms located in both the main dwelling and a secondary suite must be hard-wired into an electrical circuit and interconnected so they will all operate in unison.

Alberta's Safety System

Alberta Municipal Affairs and Housing works in partnership with the Safety Codes Council, municipalities, corporations, agencies, and other organizations to deliver effective community-focused public safety programs and services to Albertans.

Questions or more information:

Alberta Municipal Affairs and Housing

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Edmonton, Alberta T5J 4L4

Phone toll-free: 1-866-421-6929
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E-mail: safety.services@gov.ab.ca
www.municipalaffairs.alberta.ca/cp_index.cfm

Safety Codes Council

Suite 800, 10707 - 100 Avenue
Edmonton, Alberta T5J 3M1

Toll-free within Alberta:
Phone: 1-888-413-0099
Fax: 1-888-424-5134
www.safetycodes.ab.ca

Please place your agency or municipality contact information in the space below.

These brochures may be updated periodically. They have no legal status and cannot be used as an official interpretation of the various bylaws, codes and regulations currently in effect.

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6. Gas-fired furnaces and water heaters need to be enclosed in a room with fire protected walls and ceiling by the use of ½-inch drywall.

Allowing the location of the above appliances in an open living area is a dangerous practice because of possible fire (equipment malfunction) and health (carbon monoxide poisoning from the escape of flue-gas) hazards associated with such equipment. A furnace room needs to be provided with ½-inch drywall applied to both sides of the walls and the ceiling to prevent fire spread to the living areas.

7. New secondary suites shall be served by an independent heating and ventilation system.

For pre-existing secondary suites, the use of a single heating and ventilation system to serve both the main dwelling and the secondary suite is acceptable under the Alberta Fire Code. In new construction, independent heating and ventilation systems are required. Previous fire studies have demonstrated smoke migration between a secondary suite and the main dwelling can occur quickly when a common ductwork system serves both areas. Undesirable air contaminants (e.g. cigarette smoke or cooking fumes) are also transmitted more quickly if free air exchange between the suites is permitted through common ductwork.

Homeowners are encouraged to investigate heating options with local heating services companies to minimize costs.

Safety Tips

Secondary suite standards

A secondary suite is a self-contained living unit with its own kitchen, bathroom and a separate exit created in a single-family home. Secondary suites can be an important affordable housing option, provided the suites are constructed safely.

Specific construction standards for secondary suites provide landlords with clear guidelines for safe construction of such units, and tenants and their families will have greater confidence in the safety of their homes.

Province-wide standards for the construction of secondary suites are now included in the Alberta Building Code. The standards set out specifications for ceiling heights, windows, fire protection, interconnected smoke alarms, dedicated heating and ventilation systems, and separate exits. For pre-existing secondary suites (construction completed prior to December 31, 2006), the Alberta Fire Code contains similar requirements for the upgrading of such units to an acceptable level of safety.

For new construction, the requirements under the Alberta Building Code came into effect December 31, 2006. For pre-existing secondary suites, all the necessary upgrades are to be incorporated by December 31, 2008.

Alberta

