

Building Maintenance Guidelines Provisions of the Virginia Uniform Statewide Building Code and Related City Ordinances

The Code of the City of Winchester, Article IV, Building Maintenance Code (Section 6-81) adopts Part III of the Virginia Uniform Statewide Building Code (USBC). This portion of the USBC prescribes regulations to be complied with in the maintenance and repair of existing structures and equipment. Standards contained in the Virginia Uniform Statewide Building Code and City Ordinances are applied to all properties, regardless of use or location within the City.

The Department of Zoning and Inspections, Code Enforcement Section is responsible for enforcing property maintenance standards for existing buildings in the City of Winchester.

Most of the standards are common sense and a diligent look at a building will usually tell where repairs or maintenance is needed. This booklet contains a list of items which an inspector is likely to check when conducting an inspection. These guidelines are meant to be informative and help the owner or occupant get a good idea whether a property is in compliance with the ordinances of the City of Winchester.

Some properties may be well kept but may not be in compliance with the maintenance standards of the USBC. Older structures may have been built before building codes were enacted, while in other cases, structures were built to comply with the Code that was in effect when it was built. If those conditions do not endanger life or health, the Code Official would not require the structure to be modified to meet the requirements of the Code. However, some of these structures will have conditions that by design or through lack of maintenance are considered unsafe and will have to be modified to be safe. Some of these conditions are identified in this guide. A few examples of more common conditions where modification would be required are:

- Smoke detectors missing or not working
- Electrical service faulty or undersized
- Windows from sleeping area not adequate as emergency exit

In some instances, conditions that would cause a unit to be condemned as not fit to live in are pointed out. In such a serious case, either the conditions must be corrected or the occupants must leave for their own safety. Depending on the circumstances, the occupants may be allowed to stay for a short period of time, ranging from a few hours to a few days, while repairs are made.

Exterior Features

Exterior property areas should be kept in a clean, safe, and sanitary condition. Some of the most frequent exterior problems are improper garbage and rubbish storage, overgrowth of grass and tall weeds, and the improper storage of inoperable motor vehicles.

Grass and tall weeds should be maintained below ten (10) inches as to reduce rodent shelters and pollen dust problems.

Improper storage of garbage and rubbish attracts rodents, animals and vermin, produces noxious odors, and creates potential health hazards. Garbage stored outside should be placed in approved, leak proof, covered containers. Accumulations of rubbish such as ashes, paper, rags, cartons, boxes, wood, tree branches, yard trimmings, tin cans, metals, discarded appliances, and inoperable mechanical equipment are required to be disposed of properly.

Abandoned, inoperable vehicles are unsightly, clutter the neighborhood, provide a harborage for rodents, and are an attractive nuisance for children. These vehicles are required to be stored in an enclosed building or screened or shielded from view.

Vacant structures are often ignored and are deemed a fire hazard and unsafe when unsecured or open. Vacant structures are to be secured from public entry and maintained in a clean, safe, and sanitary condition.

Standing water next to a structure can cause damage to its foundation, wooden members, and creates a breeding area for nuisance insects, especially mosquitoes. Yards should be graded to drain water away from the building foundation or slab and to prevent the accumulation of stagnant water.

Walkways and driveways should be kept in a proper state of repair and be kept free of hazards thus reducing the potential for injuries.

Accessory structures such as garages, utility sheds, fences, and outside walls often receive a lower maintenance priority and should be maintained structurally sound and in good repair.

Swimming pools and their gates must be maintained to prevent accidental drowning and creating an insect harborage.

Buildings shall have approved address numbers posted in a position to be plainly legible and visible from the street or road fronting the property. These numbers shall contrast with their background. Address numbers shall be Arabic numerals or alphabet letters. Numbers or letters shall be 4" high with a minimum stroke width of ½". Numbers or letters will not be required to be upgraded unless they are missing or clearly too small to be easily seen from the street.

Foundation walls should be plumb and free from open cracks and breaks. Small cracks are common on old houses and are acceptable. Wide cracks must be sealed. Foundations that do not properly support the building load may cause the entire structure to be condemned.

Outside walls and trim should be free from holes, creaks, and loose and rotting materials; and maintained weatherproof and properly surface-coated to prevent deterioration. Brick walls should have no cracks that allow rain to get behind the bricks. Aluminum, vinyl, asbestos shingle, or other types of siding should not be missing pieces that would allow water to get in the wall or behind the siding.

Roofs and flashing should be sound, tight, and have no defects that admit rain. The obvious function of the roof is to keep water out of the interior. Leaks usually occur first in the valleys or around flashing. Serious leaks can cause walls or ceilings to fall, resulting in the unit being declared "Unfit for Habitation".

Chimneys should be maintained structurally sound and in good repair. Occasionally, deterioration may prevent their proper operation. Obstructed chimneys can cause carbon monoxide poisoning. Older chimneys frequently have loose bricks which could fall off the roof or inside the chimney or could cause the whole chimney to collapse.

Porches, stairs and decks should be maintained and structurally sound, in good repair, with proper anchorage, and capable of supporting imposed loads. Handrails and guards should be firmly attached and capable of supporting imposed loads.

Door assemblies and hardware should be maintained in good condition. Doors should close tightly and hardware should latch securely, lock, and unlock from the inside easily. Egress doors that use a key on the inside for locking and unlocking are prohibited. This is because, in an emergency, the door is difficult to unlock and a person may be unable to locate the key without delay.

Windows should be kept in sound condition; good repair, and keep out the weather. Every openable window should be openable and capable of being held open by window hardware. A tight crack in the glass would not be cited as a violation but an exposed broken edge would. Storm windows are not required.

Insect screens are required between April 1 and December 1 on every window or door that is required for ventilation in habitable spaces. The screens should be no less than 16 mesh per inch to keep out insects. Screen doors must be self-closing.

Interior Features

It is necessary for the **interior of structures** be maintained structurally sound and in a condition that prevents health and safety hazards.

Interior surfaces (walls, ceilings, floors, windows, and doors) should be in good, clean, and sanitary condition. Peeling, chipping, and flaking paint should be repaired, removed, or covered. Cracked or loose plaster or other defective conditions should be repaired. Interior surfaces that contain lead based paint can cause serious health hazards, especially to children. These surfaces should be maintained in a condition free of chipping, peeling, and flaking or removed or covered in an approved manner.

Stairs and handrails should be sound, in good repair, and capable of supporting normally imposed loads.

Doors and windows should be maintained in a state that will allow them to open and close properly.

Clearances – ceiling heights of kitchens, bathrooms, and hallways should be at least seven (7) feet. Ceilings of other rooms generally should be not less than seven (7) feet four (4) inches high. In no case may a ceiling in a living area or anything protruding down from the ceiling, such as beams or ductwork, be lower than six (6) feet. Kitchens should have at least three (3) feet of passageway between cabinets and appliances or cabinets and walls. All other rooms should be at least seven (7) feet wide. However, clearances of less than these standards may be acceptable if they cannot be increased easily and safety and comfort of living conditions is not significantly compromised.

Bedrooms should have a door for privacy, at least two (2) electrical outlets, either a window that opens for ventilation and light, or have artificial light and mechanical ventilation, and an emergency escape opening. Each bedroom should be at least 70 square feet for one (1) occupant or 50 square feet for each occupant if more than one (1). Bedrooms should be arranged so those occupants do not have to pass through one bedroom to get to another bedroom, bathroom, or living space.

Bathrooms should have a door for privacy, a usable electrical outlet (which should be, but does not have to be, a ground fault interrupter), a toilet, a sink, and a tub or shower with hot and cold water, and an openable window or mechanical ventilation to exhaust moisture.

Kitchens including a stove and refrigerator are not required. However, if provided, the kitchen should have two (2) electrical outlets and a sink. Any appliances, such as a stove, refrigerator, sink, and disposal must be installed and working properly, including the gas line to a gas stove. A kitchen may not be used for sleeping.

Overcrowding can create serious problems. For example, diseases spread more easily, privacy is lost, mental health is affected, and buildings are subject to more abuse and wear.

Overcrowding can have a destructive effect on a whole neighborhood if it takes place in several houses on the same block or several units in the same apartment building.

Minimum Area Requirements			
Minimum Area in Square Feet			
Space	1-2 Occupants	3-5 Occupants	6 or More
Living room	No requirements	120	150
Dining room	No requirements	80	100
Kitchen	50	50	60
Bedrooms	*70sf single, 50sf each for each occupant thereof. * Not be the only means of ingress/egress to other habitable spaces. *Have access to at least one (1) toilet and sink without passing through another bedroom. *Required emergency escape window or door opening to the outside.		

Common areas, like public hallways and stairs, should be properly lighted for safety and security. The owner is responsible for the condition of common areas.

Emergency exits – every story above the second story should be provided with at least two (2) different exits to the ground. However, for third floor rooms that are part of a unit on a lower level, openable windows large enough and low enough to go through may be acceptable for emergency exit. Any bedroom in a basement must either have an openable window large enough to get through or have an exterior door. If locked, exit doors should be easy to open without keys in an emergency. Deadbolts keyed from the inside are not allowed. Exits should not lead through other apartments or bathrooms.

Smoke detectors must be operable and are required on every floor level, including basements, and in the immediate area of the bedrooms. Battery-powered smoke detectors are acceptable. The property owner is responsible for providing functioning smoke detectors at the beginning of a tenancy and the resident generally is responsible for maintaining them to continue to work, including replacing old batteries. Visual alarms should be provided for the hearing impaired. The property owner is required to replace a defective smoke detector within five (5) days of written notice from the tenant that the smoke detector is defective. Absence of working smoke detectors is considered fundamentally unsafe.

Items not required or covered by the Building Maintenance Code include cable television, telephones, intercoms, microwave ovens, window blinds or draperies, carpeting, or the color of ceilings, walls, carpet, or floors.

Basic Systems

Water System – each resident must have reasonable access to a bathtub or shower, sink, and toilet supplied with enough hot and cold water of enough volume and pressure for the fixture to operate properly. All plumbing fixtures must work properly and be securely anchored. Drains should drain freely and not leak either water or sewer gases. Water heaters should have a combination temperature/pressure relief valve and discharge pipe. They should supply adequate hot water of at least 120 degrees F (120°F) to every required faucet. Fuel fired water heaters must be installed properly, including the fuel supply line and exhaust vent, and should not be located in any bathroom, bedroom, or any other occupied room that is normally closed.

Electrical systems are probably the most potentially dangerous part of a dwelling and deserve close attention. All electrical equipment, wiring, and appliances should be properly installed and maintained. Electrical service of at least 60 amperes, three wires must serve each dwelling. Any service of less than 60 amperes is considered fundamentally unsafe. The size of all wires must be adequate to carry all loads imposed. Insulation on all wires must be intact including the service cables. Every habitable space requires two (2) separate outlets. Bathrooms require one (1) outlet, new bathroom outlets shall be ground fault protected. Laundry areas require one (1) ground fault outlet. Circuits shall not be overloaded. The excessive use of extension cords in place of permanent wiring is prohibited.

Heating is required during the period of October 15th through May 1st and be capable of maintaining a temperature of not less than 65 degrees F (65°F). The minimum room temperature is not required when the outdoor temperature is below the winter design temperature for our locality (15 degrees F [15°F] or less) provided that the system is working at maximum capacity. The property owner may be required to supply the heat facility but the occupant may be required to supply the fuel. An inoperable or unsafe heating unit during the winter months may cause the unit to become uninhabitable. Supply line, vents, and chimneys shall be properly installed, maintained, and free from leaks.

The above is a summary of the Code and is offered only for general guidance. You may need more detailed information about a specific condition. The staff of the City of Winchester's Code Enforcement Division will gladly explain or elaborate on any Code requirement. They may be contacted at:

Inspections Department
Rouss City Hall
15 N. Cameron Street, Room #318
Winchester, VA 22601
Telephone: (540) 667-1815
Fax: (540) 722-3618
Email: inspections@winchesterva.gov

You may also wish to get your own copy of the Virginia Uniform Statewide Building Code and its adopted standards. An accurate and complete Code requires both the VUSBC and the International Property Maintenance Code.

A copy of the Virginia Uniform Statewide Building Code can be obtained online at www.vbcoa.org.

The International Code Council can be contacted for printed copies of the International Property Maintenance Code at www.iccsafe.org.

The Code of the City of Winchester (including Zoning Regulations) can be accessed at www.winchesterva.gov.