

Bulletin 2013-003-BLD

May 24, 2013
(Updated September 26, 2017)

SECONDARY SUITES

The intent of this Bulletin is to advise homeowners, designers, and builders of the City's requirements regarding the development and decommissioning of secondary suites in single-family dwellings and duplexes.

Background

Sometimes referred to as an in-law suite or nanny suite, a secondary suite is typically a self-contained unit within a single-family dwelling that includes cooking and sleeping facilities and a washroom. The installation of a secondary suite in a new or existing single-family dwelling or duplex is permitted in the City of North Vancouver, subject to both the City of North Vancouver Zoning Bylaw and the British Columbia Building Code (BCBC).

As defined by the BCBC, a secondary suite is an additional dwelling unit within single-family dwelling or duplex where the total floor space of the suite is not more than 90 m² (968 sq. ft.) and not more than 40% of the habitable floor space of the building. For further information regarding secondary suites in the BCBC, please see [Information Bulletin B13-02](#), produced by the Building and Safety Standards Branch of the Government of British Columbia.

The Zoning Bylaw currently permits secondary suites in all new and existing single-family dwellings (houses) and side-by-side duplexes, and includes the following requirements:

- Minimum unit size of 37.16 m² (400 sq.ft.)
- The owner of the building (or the portion of the duplex in which the secondary suite is located) must live in either the primary or secondary suite
- The secondary suite must be located in the principal structure on the site; suites are not permitted in accessory buildings (garages, etc.)
- Only one suite may be developed per single-family dwelling
- A maximum of two secondary suites may be developed per duplex, subject to the requirements laid out in this Bulletin
- One additional parking space must be provided for each secondary suite. A parking space shall not be less than 2.44 m (8 ft) in width and 5.49 m (18 ft) in length. This parking space and the parking space required for the primary suite must provide independent vehicle exiting

Construction Requirements

New and Existing Single-Family Dwellings (Houses)

New and existing suites shall comply with the requirements in Section 9.37 of Division B of the BCBC. For existing buildings, there may be interpretations available that will assist in meeting these requirements. For a list of these requirements and interpretations, please see the appendix of this Bulletin.

New Side-by-side Duplexes

As a traditional duplex is considered a two-family dwelling, the secondary suite provisions in the BCBC cannot be directly applied to each primary dwelling unit (each 'side') of the duplex; additional life safety measures are necessary. For side-by-side duplexes, a firewall is required between the primary dwelling units.

Constructed in accordance with Sentence 9.10.11.3.(1) of Division B of the BCBC, a firewall is an enhanced type of fire separation that is capable of maintaining the required fire-resistance rating for the required duration, even if the building were to suffer structural failure on one side of the firewall. In typical side-by-side duplexes, this firewall is required to be of non-combustible construction and have a 2 hour fire-resistance rating.

Once subdivided by a Code-conforming firewall, this configuration would be considered to be two separate buildings by the BCBC and in this instance the secondary suite provisions in Section 9.37 of Division B of the BCBC could be applied to each primary dwelling unit as described in the *New and Existing Single-Family Dwellings* section above.

Existing Side-by-side Duplexes

The development of a secondary suite in an existing duplex is more challenging than in a newly-constructed duplex, as it is likely cost-prohibitive to retrofit the building with a Code-conforming firewall. Where an existing duplex is not able to be modified to include a firewall, alternative measures will need to be taken.

To permit the use of the secondary suite provisions in the BCBC, an Alternative Solution will be required. Typically prepared by a Registered Professional (architect or engineer), an Alternative Solution is a method of complying with the BCBC where the requirements in the Code are not met outright; instead, a collection of mitigating features are proposed that demonstrate a level of performance equal to the prescriptive Code requirement.

Should an Alternative Solution demonstrating a level of fire and life safety equivalent to a firewall be accepted, the secondary suite provisions in Section 9.37 of Division B of the BCBC could be applied to each primary dwelling unit as described in the *New and Existing Single-Family Dwellings* section above.

Secondary Suite Permit Application Process

Prior to submitting a completed Permit application for a secondary suite, please discuss the project with the Planning and Building Divisions to review applicable Zoning Bylaw and Building Code requirements. City staff are available via the Community Development front counter.

The following documents are required in order to apply for a Secondary Suite Permit:

- Completed [Building Permit Application](#)
- Completed [Owner's Acknowledgement of Responsibility Form](#)

- Fully detailed and dimensioned floor plans, showing wall/equipment/window/door layouts, fire separations, smoke alarm locations, exit routes, heating systems, electrical layout, etc. (see the appendix of this Bulletin for additional information)
- [Electrical](#) and [Plumbing](#) Permits, if required

The above-referenced Application Forms are available online at the City’s website, or at the Community Development Department at City Hall.

Decommissioning and Removal of an Existing Secondary Suite

If a homeowner would like to remove an existing secondary suite from their house, the following options are available. Please note these options apply to both legal (authorized) and illegal (unauthorized) secondary suites.

Decommissioning of a Secondary Suite

Should a secondary suite no longer be desired, the suite may be removed. For suites with electric ranges, this decommissioning requires that the stove receptacle be blanked off (covered with a suitable material) and that the corresponding circuit breaker removed from the electrical panel by a qualified electrician. For suites with gas ranges, the gas line feeding the stove is to be disconnected and capped by a qualified gas fitter.

Electrical or gas permits are required for either decommissioning option; once the work is completed, an inspection will be completed by a City Electrical or Gas Inspector.

Conversion to a Second Cooking Facility

In some cases, a house containing a secondary suite (i.e. two dwelling units) is eligible to be converted to a house containing one dwelling unit with two cooking facilities, as described by the Zoning Bylaw. This conversion is subject to the following:

- An connection (staircase, door, etc.) is required between both cooking facilities such that 100% of the dwelling can be accessed internally, and
- A declaration is submitted to the City, in the form of a letter from the homeowner, which states that the household will consist of one *family*, as defined in the Zoning Bylaw.

Should you require further clarification, please contact the Inspections Division at 604-990-4220.

(SIGNED)

J. De Ruiter

Manager, Inspections

(SIGNED)

T. Ryce

Assistant Manager, Inspections

Appendix – Building Code Requirements for Secondary Suites

The following requirements are contained in Section 9.37 of Division B of the 2012 BC Building Code. Should a discrepancy arise between this Appendix and the BCBC, the requirements in the BCBC shall prevail.

Size:

- The lesser of 969ft² (90m²) or 40% of the total habitable floor space of the house
- Located within a building of residential occupancy containing only one other dwelling unit
- Located in and part of a building which is a single real estate entity

Ceiling Heights

- Not be less than 6'-7" (2m) with no obstructions below this height along the path of exit travel from any portion of the suite

Bedrooms

- Must have at least one openable window with a minimum unobstructed openable area of 3.8ft²(0.35m²) with no dimension less than 15" (380mm) in height and width (Note that 15" X 15" does not provide the minimum required area)
- The bottom of the opening must not be higher than 5'-0" (1.5m) from the floor, and the window must be openable from the inside without special knowledge

Minimum Window Areas

- The BCBC requires that a certain amount of natural light be provided to specific rooms within a dwelling. Except for the above noted bedroom window requirement, the BCBC allows the required window area for other rooms to be in any location within a secondary suite

Exiting

- Exit doors must be a minimum 6'-5" (1980mm) high and have a 2'-7" (800mm) clear opening width, and are permitted to swing inwards. The door must swing on its vertical access. A sliding glass door is not permitted as the only exit door from a suite
- A second exit or openable window min. 3'-4" (1m) high, 1'-10" (550mm) wide, located a maximum of 3'-4" (1m) from floor and max. 23'-0" (7m) from grade must be provided, where the primary exit leads to:
 - an exit stair serving both suites,
 - a public corridor serving both suites and served by a single exit stairway,
 - an exterior passageway serving both suites and served by a single passage way, or
 - a balcony serving both suites and served by a single exit stairway.
- Exit stairs must be a minimum of 2'-10" (860mm) wide
- Landings for exterior stairs serving two suites do not need to exceed 35.5" (900mm) in length

Doors

- Doors that penetrate fire separations are to be fire rated as below and equipped with self-closing devices
 - For 45 and 30 minute fire separations, a 20 minute rated door is required, but a 1-3/4" (45mm) solid core wood door with a maximum clearance of 1/4" (6mm) at the bottom, and 1/8" (3mm) at the top and sides may be used
 - For a 1 hour fire separation, a 45 minute rated door is required

Fire/Smoke Detection

- Hard-wired ionic smoke alarms are required within each dwelling unit, and are required to be interconnected between floors. Depending on the floor plan, more than one detector may be required in each suite
- An additional hard-wired photo-electric smoke alarm is required if the required fire separation is to be reduced from 45 minutes to 30 minutes between suites, and again must be interconnected between each suite

Fire Separations

- Fire Separations in dwelling units, exits, and common rooms (such as laundry, storage or furnace rooms) shall be separated from adjacent floor areas by fire separations (drywall) (see Fire Separation notes below) having:
 - a fire resistance rating of 45 minutes, or
 - having a fire resistance rating of 30 minutes, if used in conjunction with photo-electric smoke alarms (see above), or
 - no fire resistance rating if the building is sprinklered

Furnace Rooms

- Unless the furnace room is completely contained within the primary dwelling unit, the common walls are to be separated from the suite by the required fire separation. A rated door with self-closing device may also be required. Because of the number of ducts and pipes typically contained within a furnace room, it may be very difficult to provide such separation. The City may accept the installation of a heat detector, in lieu of a proper rated fire separation. For more information, please refer to the City's heat detector bulletin.

Plumbing System Piping

- Combustible water distribution piping may penetrate fire separations if fire-stopped
- Combustible waste, drain, and vent piping may penetrate a fire separation, provided
 - it is protected by 1/2" (12.7mm) drywall,
 - the penetration is no bigger than the piping, and
 - the combustible piping does not penetrate the gypsum board ceiling membrane

Minimum Plumbing Facilities

- Each suite is to be provided with sanitary facilities

Exterior Walls

- Exposing building faces (exterior walls facing property lines) of a house must have a 45 minute fire rating when within 4'-0" (1.2m) of the property line, and be of non-combustible construction when within 2'-0" (0.6m) of the property line

Heating Systems

- Air from one dwelling unit cannot be circulated to another suite, so a common forced air furnace cannot serve more than one dwelling. If there is a common furnace, the ducts into one unit will have to be closed off inside the fire separation and a different source of heat provided to that unit.

Trades Permits

- Permits for any plumbing, electrical or gas work in a single family dwelling with a suite are to be obtained by certified contractors, as homeowner permits are not allowable. Permits are required for any work, which may have been done without a permit.
- Electrical subpanel is required for the secondary suite. It must be accessible from the suite or must be located in a common area.

Fire Separation Notes

- Walls
 1. A 30-minute fire-resistance rating for an existing wall is achieved with a minimum of 2" x 4" studs @ 16" o/c with 1/2" Regular GWB.. For new construction, 1/2" or 5/8" Type 'X' gypsum wall board must be used.
 2. A 45-minute fire-resistance rating for a wall is achieved with a minimum of 2" x 4" studs @ 16" o/c with 1/2" or 5/8" Type 'X' gypsum wall board on each side of the wall.
 3. A 1-hour fire-resistance rating for a wall is achieved with a minimum of 2" X 4" studs @ 16" o/c with 5/8" Type "X" gypsum wall board on each side of the wall.
- Ceilings
 4. A 30-minute fire-resistance rating for a ceiling is achieved with one layer of 1/2" Type 'X' gypsum wall board fastened to wood floor joists @ 16" o/c.
 5. A 45-minute fire-resistance rating for a ceiling is achieved with 5/8" Type "X" gypsum wall board fastened to wood floor joists @ 16" o/c.
 6. A 1-hour fire-resistance rating for a ceiling is achieved with two layers of 5/8" Type 'X' gypsum wall board fastened to wood floor joists @ 16" o/c.