

Virginia Maintenance Code Requirements

Town of Front Royal, Virginia

NOVEMBER 2016

THE VIRGINIA MAINTENANCE CODE

The Town of Front Royal has adopted and enforces the Virginia Maintenance Code (VMC) on all existing structures located in the Town. This code is used in enforcement of the city's Rental Inspection Program and also used to address other structures that are not being adequately maintained. The VMC is part of the Virginia Uniform Statewide Building Code (USBC) and is based on the ICC International Property Maintenance Code, but with amendments made by the state.

Most of the requirements of the VMC are common sense, and a close look at a building usually will tell where repairs or maintenance are needed. This booklet contains a list of items based on the VMC that a Code inspector is likely to check when inspecting an existing building. This simple list is meant to be informative and help the owner or occupant get an idea whether a building meets the VMC requirements.

All buildings must be maintained to meet VMC requirements. However, some buildings constructed many years ago may be well maintained yet still not meet current VMC requirements because of the way they were designed. If the Property Maintenance Code official decides those conditions do not endanger life or health, the code official may choose not to require modifications to bring the building to current Code standards. There are, however, some design or construction features that are considered unsafe and will have to be changed. Some of these features are identified in the description of VMC requirements in this booklet. Some of the more common conditions where alterations or changes may be required are:

- Smoke Detectors
- Electrical service
- Number of electrical outlets required per room
- Windows and means of emergency exit
- Ceiling clearance (mainly in basement or attic spaces) used as living space
- Fire separation between units

In these instances, 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.

PROVISIONS OF THE VIRGINIA MAINTENANCE CODE

Exterior of Building

The exterior of all buildings must be kept in good repair and the building must be structurally sound and sanitary. Even vacant buildings must meet the provisions of the Maintenance Code, particularly with regard to exterior maintenance.

• **Street Numbers** - Each building should have the street numbers visible so they can be read easily from the street. The numbers should be at least 4 inches tall, placed on the front of the building, and contrast with the background. All units must be identified.

• **Yards** should be free from trash, garbage or inoperable vehicles, and graded so that rainwater drains away from the building and not directly onto adjoining properties.

• **Sidewalks and Driveways** should be kept in good repair, and maintained free from hazardous conditions that could cause someone to trip or fall. Damaged or uneven stair treads may need to be repaired or replaced.

- **Accessory Buildings** like garages, fences and utility buildings should be securable and kept in good repair, free from peeling paint and roof leaks.

- **Foundation Walls** should be straight; corners should be tied in with the rest of the foundation, not cracked and separated. Small cracks are common on old houses and are acceptable. Wide cracks should be sealed to block the entry of water, wind, insects and rodents. Foundations that do not properly support the house load may cause the entire building to be condemned.

- **Exterior Walls and Trim** should be weather tight. Wood surfaces should be painted or stained or have other protective covering or treatment. Brick walls should have no wide cracks that allow rain or wind to pass inside. Aluminum or vinyl siding, shingles or other protective coverings or treatment should not be missing pieces that would allow water to get in the wall or behind the siding.

- **Soffits and Fascia** (or overhangs) should be rot-free and prevent the nesting of birds and insects. Trim or decorative pieces should be securely fastened. As with siding and other trim, bare wood should be painted or stained.

- **Roofs** - The obvious function of the roof is to keep water out of the inside of the building. Roof problems are usually spotted from inside the house. Water stains on ceilings are a good indication that a roof might be leaking (if there is not a leak in the plumbing). Leaks usually occur first in valleys or around flashing. All roofs should be weather tight, properly flashed and maintained in good condition.

- **Chimneys** - Many roofs leak around a chimney. Close attention should be given to the flashing in this area. Older chimneys frequently have loose bricks, which could fall off the roof or inside the chimney, or even cause the chimney to collapse. Chimneys should be maintained with no loose bricks or mortar, free from obstructions, and operate as intended.

- **Gutters and Downspouts** - If gutters are in place they should be securely fastened and work properly. Gutters need to catch the roof water and channel it to a downspout, which then releases the water away from the house. They should not drain directly against the foundation. Rain water from the roof should be diverted away from any exterior entry door.

- **Stairs** of more than 4 steps should have handrails between 34 and 38 inches high and guardrails not less than 36 inches high, that are strong and secure enough to support a person. Treads and risers should be intact and firmly attached. Installation of new stairs, rails or guards may require a building permit.

- **Porches** - Porch roofs must be maintained just like the main roof. Columns should be rot-free and standing straight. Wood columns should be painted or stained. If the porch is more than 30 inches above the ground, it should have railings or guardrails at least 36 inches high that are strong enough to keep a person from falling. Decking and ceiling boards should not be loose, rotten or missing.

- **Exterior Doors** should close tightly so that the weather, rain, snow and wind cannot pass through. The door hardware should latch securely, lock and unlock from the inside easily. They should be strong enough to secure the building. Exterior doors may not have double keyed (key required on both sides) deadbolts. Interior deadbolts must have thumb latches or other hardware for the door. Interior grade doors may not be used for entrances from the exterior.

- **Windows** are for light, ventilation, and emergency escape. They should keep out the weather and be securable. All windows shall be easily operable and capable of being held open by

window hardware. Habitable rooms (bedroom, living room, eating area, bathroom, and kitchen) should have a window that opens, however mechanical ventilation to the exterior is allowed as an alternative in bathrooms. Any window that is required for ventilation or escape must be operable. A small tight crack in the glass might not be cited as a violation, but an exposed broken edge would. Storm windows are not required but if present should be in a safe condition and operate as designed. Windows that have been nailed or screwed shut or painted and caulked, such that the window no longer operates as intended must be returned to a working condition.

- **Insect Screens** - Every window or door required for ventilation is also required to have an insect screen in place from April 1 through December 1. The screens should be small mesh to keep out insects. Full window screens or adjustable sliders meet code. Screen doors must be self-closing.

- **Vacant Buildings** must be kept secure from entry and kept in good repair with no exterior violations of the code.

- **Swimming Pools, Spas and Hot Tubs** - Swimming pools shall be maintained in a clean and sanitary condition, and in good repair. Swimming pools, hot tubs and spas containing more than 24 inches of water must be completely surrounded by a fence or barrier at least 48 inches in height. Gates or doors in such barriers shall be self-closing and self-latching.

Basic Systems

Every living unit must have water, electricity and heat. Absence of any of these may cause the unit to be condemned.

- **Water System** - Every resident must have access to a bathtub or shower and sink supplied with hot and cold water of enough volume and pressure for the fixtures to operate properly and a working toilet. All plumbing fixtures must work properly and be securely anchored. Drains should drain freely. Water heaters should have a pressure relief valve and discharge pipe, and supply adequate hot water of a least 110 degrees Fahrenheit to every required faucet. Gas water heaters must be installed properly, including the gas supply line and exhaust vent, and should not be located in any bathroom, bedroom or any other occupied room that is normally closed.

- **Electrical System** - This is probably the most potentially dangerous part of a dwelling and deserves close attention. Each dwelling unit or apartment must be served by electrical service of at least 60 amperes, three wires (120/240 volt), and possibly more if the electrical load requires it. Any service of less than 60 amps per unit is considered unsafe and unacceptable. The size of all wires must be adequate to safely carry the current that may be demanded. Insulation on all wires, including service entrance cables, should be intact. Use of extension cords should be avoided and in some cases may be so dangerous as to be prohibited. Every bedroom, living room, dining room and kitchen must have at least two working electrical outlets. Bathrooms must have one outlet. Laundry areas should have one grounded outlet. Fuse panels should not be over-fused, and fuse stats may be required. Tenant access to fuse or breaker panels is encouraged but not required if 24- hour maintenance service is available. All GFCI (ground fault circuit interrupter) receptacles must test and reset properly. Receptacles should not be painted over, covers must be intact, and should be firmly attached to structure.

Heating is required from October 15 to May 1. In normal winter conditions the heating system must be able to maintain a temperature of at least 65 degrees within the unit. When the temperature is below the designated outdoor design temperature requirements for our area, requirements may be lowered, provided the heating system is operating at full capacity. The ability of the heating system to keep the unit warm will also be affected by the building's

insulation and weather-tightness of windows and doors. Fuel supply lines must be safely installed and free of leaks. Furnace exhaust must be safely vented without leaks. Space heaters may not be used as the sole means of heat for a unit or apartment.

- **Cooling** if supplied, must operate as designed from May 15 to October 1.
- **Changes** in materials or design features of buildings may be prohibited in Historic Districts.

Interior of Building

The interior of a building must be kept sound, sanitary and in good repair. The occupant of each living unit is responsible for keeping it clean, sanitary and free of garbage and trash.

- **Interior Doors** are for privacy and should close and latch properly. Bathrooms and bedrooms require doors with working hardware. Double keyed deadbolts are not allowed. There should be no hasps or padlocks on interior doors.
- **Interior Walls and Ceilings** should be free of holes, wide cracks, loose or falling plaster, and flaking or peeling paint. Settlement cracks in older houses are common and acceptable. All repairs/patches must be painted.
- **Floors** must be solid, intact, sanitary and free of holes. Large cracks, uneven surfaces and decayed areas must be repaired. Floors must be capable of bearing normal loads.
- **Clearances** - Ceiling heights of kitchens, bedrooms, bathrooms and hallways should be at least 7 feet or the originally built height. Kitchens should have at least 3 feet of passageway between cabinets. All other rooms should be at least 7 feet wide.
- **Bedrooms** need a door for privacy, at least two electrical outlets, and a window that opens for ventilation and light. Each bedroom should be at least 70 square feet for one occupant, or 50 square feet for each occupant if more than one. Bedrooms should be arranged so that occupants do not pass through one bedroom to get to another bedroom, bathroom, or living space.
- **Bathrooms** should have a door for privacy, an electrical outlet (newly installed outlets must be a ground fault circuit interrupter), toilet, sink and tub or shower with hot and cold water, and an operable window or mechanical ventilation to exhaust moisture.
- **Kitchens** should have two electrical outlets, a sink and a window that can be opened for ventilation or an exhaust fan. Any appliances such as a stove, refrigerator, or garbage disposal unit must be installed correctly and work properly, including the gas line to a gas stove. A kitchen may not be used for sleeping.
- **Pest Extermination** - The owner of any structure is responsible for extermination within the structure prior to renting or leasing a unit and all common areas. The occupant of any structure is responsible for the *continued* rodent and pest-free condition of the structure. If the infestation was caused by defects in the structure, the owner is responsible for pest extermination. In multifamily properties, both the owner and the tenant may be responsible.
- **Common Areas** like public hallways and stairs should be properly lighted for safety and security. The owner is responsible for the condition of the common areas. Common areas should be kept free of excessive clutter or storage that might block emergency egress.

• **Emergency Exits** - Every story above the second story should be provided with at least two different exits to the ground unless third story rooms are part of a second story unit. Any bedroom in a basement must either have an operable window large enough to get through, or have easy access to two independent exits out of the building. If locked, exit doors should be easy to open without keys in an emergency. Dead bolts keyed from both sides are not allowed. Doors cannot have hasps capable of being padlocked. Exits should not lead through other apartments or bathrooms. Exit paths should not be restricted by anything that could prevent a person from escaping during an emergency.

• **Smoke Detectors** must be operable and are required on every floor level including basements, in each bedroom, 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 their continue operation by replacing old batteries. Visual alarms should be provided for the hearing-impaired. Hard wired smoke detectors, if installed, must be maintained in working order.

• **Fire Hazards** - the area around water heaters, furnaces and other heat producing devices should be free from storage or accumulations of flammable materials.

ITEMS NOT REQUIRED or covered by the Virginia Maintenance Code include cable television, telephones, intercoms, microwave ovens, antennas, window blinds or draperies, or the color of ceilings, walls, carpet or floors.

The preceding is a summary of the Code and is offered only for general guidance. If you need more detailed information the Department of Planning and Zoning staff will gladly explain or elaborate on any Code requirement.

You may also wish to get your own copy of the VMC. This Code is based on the ICC International Property Maintenance Code and is available at their web site (www.iccsafe.org) or booksellers.

RENTAL CERTIFICATE OF COMPLIANCE PROGRAM

The Rental Inspection program is designed to protect and enhance the quality of the town's housing stock and eliminate dangerous living conditions. The VMC provides the standards for these inspections. Inspections are intended to:

- Help protect the health, safety and welfare of the occupants through identifying conditions that could be dangerous or injurious.
- Help prevent decaying rental properties and the resulting negative impact they have on neighborhoods through identifying conditions that are damaging to the building.
- Provide for compliance with the VMC.

Once notified, residential rental property owners are required to inform the city of any units they own that are within the rental inspection districts.

RENTAL INSPECTION

During the inspection, the inspector will do a thorough check of the building. It will not always be possible to verify that every item is installed and working properly. (For example, a vacant unit in the summer may not have fuel for the heating system to be tested. However, water and electricity must be available for the unit to be inspected.) The inspector will identify conditions that must be corrected and the owner will be given a reasonable amount of time to make necessary repairs.

When the inspection is completed, the inspector will do one of three things:

- Issue a Certificate of Exemption, meaning no violations of the VMC were found. The owner will also be given a copy of the Certificate of Exemption. However, if the unit becomes in violation of the Maintenance Code during the exemption period the certificate may be revoked.
- Issue a Notice of Violation which will give a period of time to correct the violations. The length of time given will depend on several factors, such as extent of the repairs, seriousness of the conditions, and time of year.
- Issue a Notice of Unsafe/Unfit Structure. The time given to make repairs or vacate the unit may range from a matter of hours to several days, depending on the seriousness or danger of the code violations.

When the owner has made the needed repairs, the owner will notify the inspector and the unit will be re-inspected to verify that violations have been corrected. Note: Many repairs require a building permit. Not getting a building permit when required is against the law. If the conditions cited aren't corrected in the time given, the owner may be summoned to General District Court.

BUILDING PERMITS

There are several types of permits – building, electrical, plumbing and mechanical are the most common. In this booklet, all of these types are referred to as “building permits” unless stated otherwise. A permit authorizes specific work to be performed as provided by the USBC and are issued by the Warren County Building Inspections Department. A Zoning Permit issued by the Town of Front Royal is also required for most building permits.

When Permits are Required

Building permits are required before most major work to a building can be carried out but not usually for “ordinary repairs.”

Examples of major work that requires a permit include:

- Removing any part of a wall
- Cutting any structural support
- Altering or replacing a water supply, sewer line, gas line, furnace, electrical wiring or venting
- Work affecting public health or general safety
- Change of use
- Adding dwelling units or rooms
- Changing fuel supply type for comfort heat or water heaters
- Moving or demolishing a structure

Examples of ordinary work that would not require a permit include:

- Painting
- Roof patching or replacement (except in a historic district)
- Replacement of plumbing or electrical appliances or fixtures with similar equipment, including water heaters (Gas appliances require a permit)
- Repair or replacement of doors and windows of similar size in the same location (except in a historic district)
- Siding repairs or vinyl siding (except in a historic district)

Who May Get a Permit

A building permit may be obtained by the property owner or a licensed contractor qualified to do the work.

Who May do the Work Under a Permit

A property owner or qualified contractor may perform the work.

If you have any questions, please contact:

Building Permits

Code Enforcement

Planning & Zoning