

Saskatoon Fire Department – Boarded Buildings

ISSUE

Is additional regulation of boarded buildings and vacant lots needed in the City of Saskatoon (“City”)?

BACKGROUND

History

In May 2023, City Council approved Saskatoon’s [Housing Action Plan](#) (the “Plan”) which outlined 12 initiatives required for the application of the Housing Accelerator Fund, with additional change to the Plan being approved by City Council on [November 22, 2023](#).

Initiative 7 of the Plan was to develop a disincentive program for underutilized properties. As outlined in the Plan, the Saskatoon Fire Department (“SFD”) was to explore a bylaw which would disincentivize vacant lots/underutilized properties. Vacant and derelict properties negatively impact and damage the quality of surrounding neighbourhoods and communities.

There have been several reports regarding boarded buildings, vacant lots, and related topics in the past. These reports are listed below in four categories (Boarded Buildings, Demolition Permits, Vacant Lot and Adaptive Re-Use, and Vacant Lot Tax Strategy), and provide a detailed background of how the City’s current approach has been refined over time.

Boarded Buildings

At its meeting held on [August 12, 2019](#), the Standing Policy Committee on Planning, Development and Community Services, resolved, in part:

That the Administration report back by fourth quarter in 2019 about current City and other agency engagement with currently boarded-up houses in Pleasant Hill and other neighbourhoods experiencing similar rates, identifying process to ensure more comprehensive and proactive follow up on this issue in our city.

At its meeting held on [January 14, 2020](#), the Standing Policy Committee on Planning, Development and Community Services considered a report from the SFD on Boarded Buildings and resolved:

That the Standing Policy Committee on Planning, Development and Community Services endorse Option 1 outlined in the January 14, 2020, report of the Fire Chief and that the Department adjust the existing inspection model to designate boarded buildings a Priority 1 concern.

At its meeting held on [September 14, 2020](#), the Standing Policy Committee on Planning, Development and Community Services received an information report from the SFD entitled Boarding Buildings – Update. This report provided an update on the effectiveness of designating boarded buildings as a Priority 1 concern.

Demolition Permits

At its Regular Business Meeting held on [March 26, 2018](#), City Council considered a report of the Community Services Division and resolved:

1. That the proposed amendments to Bylaw No. 9455, *The Building Bylaw, 2017*, as outlined in the March 5, 2018, report of the General Manager, Community Services Department, be approved; and
2. That the City Solicitor be requested to prepare the necessary amendments to Bylaw No. 9455, *The Building Bylaw, 2017*.

At its Regular Business Meeting held on [May 28, 2018](#), City Council considered a report of the City Solicitor's Office and resolved:

That City Council consider Bylaw No. 9497, *The Building Amendment Bylaw, 2018*.

Vacant Lot and Adaptive Reuse Program

At its Regular Business Meeting held on [August 18, 2010](#), City Council considered a report of the Community Services Department and resolved:

1. That City Council approve, in principle, the proposed Vacant Lot Development and Adaptive Reuse Incentive Program as described in Attachment 1 to the report of the General Manager, Community Services Department dated June 30, 2010;
2. That the Administration be directed to prepare a City Council Policy for the new Vacant Lot Development and Adaptive Reuse Incentive Program;
3. That the required financing for the proposed Vacant Lot Development and Adaptive Reuse Incentive Program be drawn from the Property Realized Reserve;
4. That the Municipal Enterprise Zone Program be discontinued upon the exhaustion of remaining funds, with the exception of the Façade Grants which will receive an additional \$75,000 for this purpose; and
5. That City Council endorse the recommendations for the policy options to discourage vacant lots as outlined in Attachment 1 to the report of the General Manager, Community Services Department dated June 30, 2010.

At its Regular Business Meeting held on [March 7, 2011](#), City Council considered a report from the Community Services Department and resolved:

1. That the new City Council Policy for the Vacant Lot and Adaptive Reuse Incentive Program be adopted as described in Attachment 1 of the report of the General Manager, Community Services Department dated February 3, 2011;
2. That City Council rescind the Downtown Housing Incentives Policy No. C09-032;
3. That Section 12 of Reserves for Future Expenditures Policy No. C03-003 be amended by replacing the “Downtown Housing Reserve” with the “Vacant Lot and Adaptive Reuse Incentive Reserve”, as defined in the report of the General Manager, Community Services Department dated February 3, 2011; and
4. That the current balance in the Downtown Housing Reserve be transferred to the new Vacant Lot and Adaptive Reuse Incentive Reserve to support the new incentive program.

At its Regular Business Meeting held on [December 20, 2023](#), City Council considered a report of the Community Services Department and resolved:

1. That the proposed amendments to Council Policy C09-035, the Vacant Lot and Adaptive Reuse Incentive Program Policy, as outlined in the December 6, 2023, report of the Community Services Division, be approved; and
2. That the City Clerk be requested to make necessary amendments to Council Policy C09-035, the Vacant Lot and Adaptive Reuse Incentive Program Policy.

Vacant Lot Tax Strategy

At its Regular Business Meeting held on [November 24, 2014](#), City Council considered a report of Community Services Department and resolved:

1. That the information be received; and
2. That the Neighbourhood Planning Section report back to the Standing Policy Committee on Planning, Development and Community Services in due course on the option to pursue a similar vacant lot tax strategy as has been implemented by the City of Moose Jaw.

At its meeting held on [November 5, 2018](#), the Standing Policy Committee on Planning, Development and Community Services received an information report from the Community Services Department entitled Inquiries – Vacant Lots for Extended Periods of Time and Tax Policy Tools to Encourage Development. This report provided information regarding the option to pursue a similar vacant lot property tax strategy implemented by the City of Moose Jaw.

Current Status

Since October 2020, the SFD has prioritized and tracked vacant/boarded buildings as a Priority 1 concern. Vacant properties tend to be in disrepair, dilapidated to point of requiring demolition, and are unsecured or secured but are subject to unlawful entry by unauthorized person(s). Their appearance tends to affect the amenity of the neighborhood and, at times, can be a health and safety risk depending on their state of ruin.

Vacant/boarded structures come to the SFD's attention either as the result of a fire, an emergency call, or a complaint from the public. As of April 9, 2025, in Saskatoon, and in particular, core neighbourhoods, the statistics show relatively low numbers of boarded or vacant buildings compared to other municipalities.

From 2018 to present, there were 280 complaints regarding properties that have been resolved and the file closed. The information below highlights some of the data regarding SFD's property complaint files.

Resulted in a demolition of a structure.	49
Re-occupied after the order process.	184
Currently not occupied and vacant (after repairs).	9
Vacant lots.	70
Vacant lots (at the time of inspection/structures demolished prior to SFD site visit). *many properties demolished to build infills	22
Currently active and boarded (various stages of SFD enforcement process).	68
Currently active and boarded – result of a fire (of the 68 above).	26
Currently active and boarded – vacant commercial buildings (of the 68 above).	3

City of Saskatoon's Current Approach

Since 2020, the SFD adjusted the inspection model to designate boarded buildings a Priority 1 concern. This created a faster response to all boarded buildings in Saskatoon. The City currently has regulations in Bylaw 8175 [The Property Maintenance & Nuisance Abatement Bylaw, 2003](#) and Bylaw 7990 [The Fire and Protective Services Bylaw, 2001](#) that apply to all vacant and boarded buildings. The current bylaw provisions allow for Orders to Remedy to be issued to property owners, charges can be laid for non-compliance of bylaw provisions, and work can be undertaken by the City if the order is not complied with. As well, any costs incurred by the City can be charged to the property owner through addition to the tax roll.

The SFD has 68 vacant/boarded buildings currently in the active enforcement process. Although there will be vacant or boarded properties that have not yet come to the attention of SFD, this number is believed to be a reasonably accurate reflection of the current situation in Saskatoon.

Orders to Remedy have been issued with respect to these buildings and they are in various stages of the enforcement process. Demolitions or repairs to structures can take up to 24 months depending on the scope of construction/repairs required and other factors such as asbestos remediation.

Approaches in Other Jurisdictions

Appendix 1 is a jurisdictional scan of several other municipalities across Canada. It is important to note that the legislative framework is different in other municipalities. For example, the City of Winnipeg has express powers in their Charter to pass bylaws with respect to vacant and derelict buildings. There are also provisions allowing them to expropriate derelict buildings without compensation. The City of Toronto and the City of Vancouver both have provisions in their enabling legislation allowing them to create a vacant unit tax for residential buildings. The City of Edmonton also has powers in their enabling legislation allowing them to create property subclasses for vacant buildings.

In Saskatchewan, [The Cities Act](#) is currently open for amendments. One of the areas where changes were requested was to provide cities with additional regulatory powers with respect to vacant buildings. The province has indicated that amendments in this area are not planned. Instead, the province has indicated they would work with municipalities to put in controls that align with the current legislative framework in the Act.

OPTIONS

Option 1 - Continuation of Enhanced Enforcement Process (Status Quo)

Under this option, SFD would continue with its current enhanced enforcement process.

The SFD would continue to designate boarded buildings as a Priority 1 concern with a focus on using the City's current enforcement tools to resolve issues with these buildings. The City already has bylaw provisions that have been successfully used to manage vacant buildings. *The Property Maintenance & Nuisance Abatement Bylaw, 2003* has provisions requiring buildings be maintained to specified standards. *The Fire and Protective Services Bylaw, 2001* has provisions that require vacant buildings be secured. Both bylaws provide for Order(s) to Remedy Contraventions of the bylaw, fines, and the ability for the City to complete work that is then added to the property taxes for the property.

Advantages:

- Enforcement system is already in place and working well.
- Additional administration expenses are not required to implement a permit system.
- Bylaw amendments are not required to implement.

Disadvantages:

- Does not disincentivize properties remaining vacant after remediation.

Option 2 - Addition of a Vacant Residential Property Registry

Under this option, SFD would continue with its current enhanced enforcement process, and a vacant residential property registry system would also be created for implementation. Vacant commercial properties would not be part of this registry. Under this option it is proposed:

- Residential buildings vacant for more than six months would need to obtain an annual permit.
- Permits would have a fee attached to them.
- Exemptions would be provided for vacancy due to construction or renovation.
- Vacant residential buildings would need to be inspected annually for a fee.

Advantages:

- Disincentivize residential properties remaining vacant after remediation or repair.

Disadvantages:

- Establishment of a permit system would require additional administrative resources and costs.
- Bylaw amendments required to implement

RECOMMENDATION

That the Standing Policy Committee on Planning, Development and Community Services recommend to City Council that:

1. The Administration proceed according to Option 1 – Continuation of Enhanced Enforcement Process;
2. The proposed amendments to Bylaw No. 8175, *The Property Maintenance & Nuisance Abatement Bylaw, 2003* be approved; and
3. The City Solicitor's Office be requested to make the necessary amendments to Bylaw No. 8175, *The Property Maintenance & Nuisance Abatement Bylaw, 2003*.

RATIONALE

Administration is recommending Option 1 – Continuation of Enhanced Enforcement Process. While this option does not include creating a disincentive program for underutilized properties under Initiative 7 of the HAF, Administration's review and research confirms that continuing the enhanced enforcement process meets the initiative's intent. Since its implementation, the number of boarded buildings in Saskatoon has significantly decreased. To date, all but nine properties that could be repaired are re-occupied.

Given the small number of properties, creating an additional vacant property registry system is unnecessary. Other jurisdictions implementing such registry systems faced hundreds of vacant and boarded buildings. The SFD will continue to work with property owners to ensure properties remain in good condition and are eligible for occupancy.

The legislative framework in Saskatchewan is significantly different than other jurisdictions. The disincentive options for the City are more limited than in other jurisdictions. Given the legislative framework in Saskatchewan, the ability to implement a full vacant property registry is questionable. Administration is not expecting amendments in the near-term to *The Cities Act* to enhance the City's powers in this area.

A vacant property registry would not assist with the speed of repairs and/or demolitions. Most jurisdictions exempt properties from requiring a vacant property permit during repairs as properties cannot be occupied during this time. Instead, a registry is targeted at those properties that can be occupied but the property owner chooses not to have them occupied.

There is a cost to implementing a registry system. Given the small number of properties identified in Saskatoon (currently nine properties), it is unlikely that the City could implement a system that would result in complete cost recovery through permit and inspection fees. Additional funding would be needed to implement a residential vacant property registry.

Proposed Bylaw Amendments

There are provisions in *The Property Maintenance & Nuisance Abatement Bylaw, 2003* with respect to weeds and garbage on private property. SFD uses these provisions frequently to ensure vacant land is managed appropriately. Orders to Remedy are issued to property owners to clean up their property. If property owners fail to comply, SFD uses a supplier roster of contractors who are retained to clean up properties and any costs are added to the property tax roll. It has been difficult for SFD to prioritize these properties, as life safety matters take precedence. A complaint basis is used to identify these properties. With respect to some properties, there have been multiple complaints. Section 61.2 of *The Property Maintenance & Nuisance Abatement Bylaw, 2003* states:

- “61.2 (1) Notwithstanding the generality of subsection 61(1), a person contravenes this Bylaw by causing or permitting:
- (a) the land to be overgrown with grass or weeds;
 - (b) the land or buildings on the land to become untidy and unsightly;
 - (c) any junked vehicle to be kept on the lands; or
 - (d) any dangerous open excavation to exist in or on the land or in or about any building or structure.

- (2) The following procedure shall apply to contraventions of the Bylaw under this section:
- (a) a municipal inspector may issue a notice of bylaw violation to any person committing a contravention under subsection (1). The notice shall require the person to pay to the City the penalty set out below:
- (i) for a first contravention, \$250;
- (ii) for a second contravention, \$500; and
- (iii) for a third contravention, \$750;”

The SFD is proposing an amendment to the fine amounts as follows:

- \$250 for a first offence will remain;
- \$1,000 for a second offence; and
- \$2,000 for a third or subsequent offence.

Increasing fines will encourage property owners to either prioritize maintenance of their properties or hire property management firms to manage their properties. The fine for a first offence is proposed to remain the same. Instead, the increases are targeted at property owners that have failed to maintain their properties repeatedly.

Other Possible Initiatives

Purchase and/or Expropriation

If there are specific properties the City would like to see addressed, the City could make offers to purchase buildings and/or land. Property owners would need to agree to sell their property to the City. A source of funding to purchase property would need to be identified.

Expropriation remains a last resort. Unlike the City of Winnipeg, Saskatoon does not have the ability to expropriate derelict properties without compensation. Even in Winnipeg, this is an extraordinary remedy that requires multiple steps and appears to be rarely used. The City would have to expropriate any property using *The Municipal Expropriation Act*. A municipal purpose would have to be identified, and the City would first be required to attempt to acquire the property by agreement with the owner. Compensation is required to be paid to the property owner.

Tax Policy Initiatives

Other jurisdictions have specified tools to create tax policies specific to vacant buildings. Saskatchewan does not have those same tools in our legislation.

Some jurisdictions in Saskatchewan have used tax subclasses to create subclasses for vacant properties. Different mill rate factors can then be applied to those sub-classes which can create a disincentive for property owners to allow the land to remain vacant.

In the spring of 2014, the City of Moose Jaw implemented a new tax subclass for vacant commercial and industrial properties. Taxes on these sites were raised a factor of two and half times previous taxation levels. In 2017, the City of Moose Jaw eliminated its vacant property tax subclass due to a variety of challenges, including a lack of evidence that it had been effective.

The City of North Battleford has created a sub-class for vacant commercial property along the Key Commercial Corridor. These properties have a mill rate three times the annual commercial class mill rate. It is unclear whether this property subclass has had any impact in reducing the vacant commercial property along this corridor in North Battleford.

At its [January 29, 2025, meeting](#), Regina City Council asked Administration to report back on the creation of a property subclass for standalone surface parking lots and property sub-classes for nuisance and abandoned properties and buildings. This report is not expected until Q4 of 2025.

Vacant Land and Targeted Incentives

There has been previous reporting with respect to vacant land. The SFD is not planning additional initiatives when it comes to vacant land other than the bylaw amendments noted above.

[Council Policy C09-035, the Vacant Lot and Adaptive Reuse Incentive Program Policy](#) (“VLAR”) was approved in 2011 to encourage infill development on chronically vacant sites and adaptive reuse of vacant buildings within Saskatoon’s established neighbourhoods. The Planning and Development Department is bringing forward reporting recommending targeted incentives to support several City priorities. In addition, through the Affordable Housing Strategy, Administration will investigate a rental acquisition and repair incentive program to assist with supporting and maintaining rental unit supply.

ADDITIONAL IMPLICATIONS/CONSIDERATIONS

There are no additional implications with respect to the recommended option. If Committee chooses other options, there could be financial implications and/or bylaw amendments required. A budget to implement a permit system would need to be determined. Significant bylaw amendments would be required, and it would be some months before this option could be implemented. Engagement with affected property owners should be considered before implementation.

APPENDICES

1. Appendix 1 - Jurisdictional Scan of Other Municipalities

Report Approval

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