

Construction Codes Advisory

Promoting construction of safe, healthy, habitable buildings

Secondary Suites

Question

How does the National Building Code of Canada 2020 (NBC 2020) apply to *secondary suites*?"

Answer

The NBC 2020 recognizes *secondary suites* as a component that can be developed in a house. It details an owner's requirements to ensure the *secondary suite* is safe, healthy and habitable.

Background

Homeowners have been developing rental spaces in their houses for generations. However, earlier building codes did not recognize them unless all the requirements for two-unit dwellings were applied.

The NBC 2020 requires a *secondary suite* as a single-family dwelling component, with requirements for life safety that are unique from earlier editions of the NBC.

Secondary Suite

A *secondary suite* is a self-contained *dwelling unit* with a prescribed maximum *floor area* in a *building* or portion of a *building* of only *residential occupancy*. It can only contain one other *dwelling unit* and common spaces. Both *dwelling units* must constitute a single real estate entity. *Secondary suites* are typically created within an existing single-family dwelling or house, either constructed as an addition to an existing house or incorporated within the existing *buildings*. A *secondary suite* may have more than one *storey* and may be above, below or on the same *storey* as the principal *suite*.

Examples of *buildings* where *secondary suites* are allowed include individual detached houses or where the *secondary suite* is in a portion of a *building*, semi-detached houses, free-hold row houses and townhouses. Excluded are apartment *buildings* that have more than two *dwelling units*.

As per provincial legislation, neither the principal *suite* nor *secondary suite* can be strata-titled or otherwise subdivided from the remainder of the house. Strata-titled means that a portion of a *building* is individually owned. A residential *building* consisting of a principal *suite* and a *secondary suite* must be registered under the same title and owned by a single owner.

Compliance with *The Construction Codes Act, The Building Code Regulations* and the National Building Code of Canada 2020 (NBC 2020) is addressed in this advisory. Words in italics, other than Act and Regulation titles, are defined in the NBC 2020.

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To determine whether a *secondary suite* can be developed in a home, the NBC 2020 prescribes a maximum size ratio between the principal *suite* and the *secondary suite* in Division B, Article 9.1.2.1. This limits the *floor area* of all *storeys* to be not more than the lesser of:

- 1) 80 per cent of the total *floor area* of all *storeys* of the other *dwelling unit* or principal *suite*, excluding the *garage floor area* and common spaces serving both the principal *suite* and the *secondary suite*; and
- 2) 80 m².

The NBC 2020 allows the relaxation of several code provisions in the design and construction of *secondary suites*. The most significant is the relaxation from a *fire separation* to a smoke-tight barrier between the principal *suite* and the *secondary suite*. A smoke-tight barrier is achieved by installing a continuous layer of 12.7 mm (1/2 in.) drywall on walls and ceilings. The door leading into the *secondary suite* must be solid core, minimum 45 mm (1 1/2 in.) thick and equipped with a self-closing device.

Other provisions an owner must be aware of include:

- Bedroom windows in the principal *suite* and *secondary suite* must meet minimum requirements for emergency purposes.
- The principal *suite* and *secondary suite* must have an independent heat source with no interconnection of heating systems.
- Smoke and carbon monoxide alarms must be interconnected between the principal *suite* and *secondary suite*.

The following checklist references the NBC 2020 requirements for designing and constructing a *secondary suite*.

NBC 2020, Division B, Part 9 *Secondary Suite* Checklist

*NBC 2020 Article	Design Description	Design Requirements for <i>Secondary Suite</i> (or as otherwise identified)	√
9.1.2.1.	Limits on Floor Area	<i>Secondary suite</i> size limitation is 80 per cent of the total <i>floor area</i> of all <i>storeys</i> of the <i>dwelling unit</i> , with the maximum <i>floor area</i> of <i>secondary suite</i> being 80 m ² .	
9.5.3.1.	Ceiling Height	Not less than 1.95 m and not less than 1.85 m under beams and ducting.	
9.5.5.1.	Doorway Opening Sizes	See Division B, Table 9.5.5.1. Size of Doors	
9.5.5.1.	Doorway Openings	Not less than 1890 mm high within a <i>secondary suite</i> for swing-type doors and folding doors.	
9.5.5.1.	Entrance Door Sizing	House with a <i>secondary suite</i> including common spaces (required entrance), not less than 810 mm wide and not less than 1980 mm high.	
9.8.1.2.	Stairs, Ramps, Landings, Handrails and Guards in Garages	Stairs, <i>ramps</i> , landings, handrails and <i>guards</i> in garages located in a house with a <i>secondary suite</i> , including their common spaces, shall comply with the requirements of Section 9.8 as applicable to <i>dwelling units</i> .	
9.8.2.1.	Stairway Width	Not less than 860 mm.	

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9.8.2.2.	Clear Height Over Stairs	Not less than 1950 mm.	
9.8.3.1.	Permitted Stair Configurations	The following are permitted in a house with a <i>secondary suite</i> : <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Straight <i>flights</i>, • Curved <i>flights</i> (see Division B, Part 3), • Spiral stairs (see Division B, Sentence 9.8.4.7.(2)), <i>flights</i> with rectangular treads and winders (see Division B, Article 9.8.4.6.) or • <i>Flights</i> with a mix of rectangular and <i>tapered treads</i> where all <i>tapered treads</i> shall turn in the same direction. 	
9.8.4.1.	Dimension for Stair Risers	Rectangular treads, <i>tapered treads</i> and winders: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maximum rise of 200 mm and minimum rise of 125 mm. 	
9.8.4.2.	Dimension for Rectangular Treads	Rectangular treads: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maximum run of 355 mm and minimum run of 255 mm. 	
9.8.4.9.	Open Risers	Permitted in interior and exterior stairs.	
9.8.5.2.	Ramp Width	Not less than 860 mm.	
9.8.5.3.	Height Over Ramp	Not less than 1950 mm.	
9.8.6.2.	Required Landings	Landing may be omitted at the top on an exterior <i>flight</i> of stairs serving a house with a <i>secondary suite</i> provided: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the stair does not contain more than three risers, • the principal door is a sliding door or swings away from the stairs, and • only a storm or screen door, if any, swings over the stairs and is equipped with hardware to hold it open. 	
9.8.6.4.	Height Over Landings	Not less than 1950 mm.	
9.8.7.1.	Required Handrails-Interior Stairs	One handrail is required on all interior stair configurations regardless of stair width.	
9.8.7.1.	Required Handrails – Ramps	One handrail is required on straight or curved <i>ramps</i> less than 1100 mm in width and two handrails are required on all <i>ramps</i> 1100 mm or greater in width.	
9.8.7.1.	Required Handrails – Exterior Stairs	One handrail is required on all exterior stair configurations having more than three risers.	
9.8.7.2.	Continuity of Handrails	The handrail can start from a newel post or volute installed on the bottom tread.	
9.8.7.7.	Design and Attachment of Handrails	Applicable where exterior or interior handrails are attached to wood studs or blocking, the attachment shall be deemed to comply where: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the attachment points are spaced not more than 1.2 m apart, measured on the horizontal plane, • the first attachment point at either end is located no more than 300 mm from the end of the handrail, and 	

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		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> the fasteners consist of not less than 2 No. 8 wood screws at each point, penetrating not less than 32 mm into solid wood. 	
9.8.8.2.	Loads on Guards	Division B, Table 9.8.8.2. prescribes loads on <i>guards</i> but need not apply where the <i>guard</i> construction used has been demonstrated to provide effective performance.	
9.8.8.3.	Height of Guards	Interior <i>guard</i> height not less than 900 mm high and exterior <i>guard</i> height not less than 900 mm high where the walking surface served by the <i>guard</i> is not more than 1800 mm above the finished ground level.	
9.8.9.1.	Loads – Stairs/Ramps	Not less than 1.9 kPa.	
9.8.9.4.	Stair Stringer Spacing	Spacing between stringers to be not less than 900 mm on centre or 1200 mm on centre where the risers support the front portion of the tread.	
9.9.4.2.	Fire Separation for Exits	Constructed as a smoke-tight barrier of not less than 12.7 mm gypsum board.	
9.9.4.4.	Openings Near Unenclosed Exterior Exit Stairs and Ramps	<i>Unprotected openings</i> in exterior walls shall be protected with wired glass in fixed steel frames or glass block conforming to Articles 9.10.13.5. and 9.10.13.7. where an unenclosed exterior <i>exit stair</i> or <i>ramp</i> provides the only means of egress from a <i>suite</i> and is exposed to fire from <i>unprotected openings</i> in the exterior walls of another <i>fire compartment</i> , or another <i>dwelling unit</i> , ancillary space or common space in a house with a <i>secondary suite</i> , and <i>unprotected openings</i> in the exterior walls of the <i>building</i> are within 3 m horizontally and less than 10 m below or less than 5 m above the <i>exit stair</i> or <i>ramp</i> .	
9.9.4.6.	Openings Near Exit Doors	<i>Unprotected openings</i> shall be protected with wired glass in fixed steel frames or glass block conforming to Articles 9.10.13.5. and 9.10.13.7., where an exterior <i>exit</i> in one <i>dwelling unit</i> , ancillary space or common space in a house with <i>secondary suite</i> is within 3 m horizontally of the <i>unprotected opening</i> serving another <i>dwelling unit</i> , ancillary space or common space in a house with <i>secondary suite</i> and the exterior walls of the fire compartments, <i>dwelling units</i> , ancillary spaces and common spaced in a house with a <i>secondary suite</i> intersect at an exterior angle of less than 135°.	
9.9.9.3.	Shared Egress Facilities	The upper suite shall be provided with a second and separate <i>means of egress</i> where an egress door from that <i>dwelling unit</i> opens onto an exterior passageway that has a <i>floor</i> assembly with a <i>fire-resistance rating</i> less than 45 min, is served by a single exit stairway or <i>ramp</i> , and is located more than 1.5 m above adjacent ground level.	
9.9.10.1.	Egress from Bedroom	Window designed for emergency purposes, including a minimum unobstructed opening of not less than 0.35 m ² in area with no dimension less than 380 mm and designed to maintain the required opening during an emergency without the need for additional support.	

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9.10.8.3.	Wall, Columns, Aches, and Beam Protection	Constructed with not less than 12.7 mm gypsum board as protection.	
9.10.9.1.	Application	This Article identifies the application of Division B, Subsection 9.10.9. Fire Separations and Smoke-tight Barriers between Rooms and Spaces within Buildings, with specific reference to smoke-tight barriers required in houses with a <i>secondary suite</i> and common spaces.	
9.10.9.2.	Construction of Wall or Floors	Constructed as a smoke-tight barrier.	
9.10.9.3.	Protection of Openings	Solid core door, 45 mm thick with a self-closing device.	
9.10.9.4.	Floor Assemblies	Floor assemblies within a house with a <i>secondary suite</i> need not be constructed as <i>fire separations</i> .	
9.10.9.16.	Separation of Residential Suites	Walls and floor-ceiling framing in a house with a <i>secondary suite</i> that separate <i>dwelling units</i> from each other or <i>dwelling units</i> from ancillary spaces and common spaces are not required to have a <i>fire-resistance rating</i> where the walls and floor-ceiling framing are protected by a continuous smoke-tight barrier of not less than 12.7 mm thick gypsum board installed on both sides of walls and the underside of floor-ceiling framing.	
9.10.9.17.	Separation of Public Corridors	Where a <i>public corridor</i> is located in a house with a <i>secondary suite</i> , a continuous smoke-tight barrier of not less than 12.7 mm gypsum board shall be installed on both sides of walls separating the corridor from the remainder of the <i>building</i> and the underside of floor-ceiling framing separating the corridor from the remainder of the <i>building</i> .	
9.10.10.4.	Furnace Room	Both sides of any wall assembly and the underside of any floor-ceiling framing separating the furnace room from both <i>dwelling units</i> or their common spaces are protected with a smoke-tight barrier of not less than 12.7 mm gypsum board.	
9.10.11.2.	Firewalls Not Required	A <i>party wall</i> on a property line of a <i>building</i> of residential occupancy need not be constructed as a <i>firewall</i> , provided it is constructed as a <i>fire separation</i> having not less than a 1 h <i>fire-resistance rating</i> , where the <i>party wall</i> separates a house with a <i>secondary suite</i> including their common spaces, or two houses with as <i>secondary suite</i> including their common spaces.	
9.10.12.3.	Exterior Walls Meeting at an Angle	Prescribes protection requirements where interior walls between <i>dwelling units</i> , ancillary spaces or common spaces in a house with a <i>secondary suite</i> are not constructed as <i>fire separations</i> , the exterior wall of each <i>dwelling unit</i> , ancillary space or common space within 1.2 m distance shall be finished on the interior with not less than 12.7 mm gypsum board.	
9.10.12.4.	Protection of Soffits	Prescribes required soffit protection where the portion of any soffit enclosing a projection is: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • less than 2.5 m vertically above a window or door; and • less than 1.2 m from either side of the window or door. 	

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9.10.15.1.	Application of the NBC	Applicable to spatial separation requirements when constructing a <i>dwelling unit</i> which contains a <i>secondary suite</i> .	
9.10.19.5.	Smoke Alarms	Wirelessly interconnected or hard-wired connected between the principal <i>suite</i> and the <i>secondary suite</i> .	
9.11.1.1.	Sound Transmission	<i>Apparent Sound Transmission Class (ASTC)</i> rating of not less than 47 or, <i>Sound Transmission Class (STC)</i> rating of not less than 50.	
9.32.1.2.	Required Ventilation	No requirement for heating-season ventilation for <i>exits, public corridors</i> and ancillary spaces that are not within a <i>dwelling unit</i> unless the ancillary spaces contain exhaust devices where make-up air is required.	
9.32.3.8.	Protection Against Depressurization	This Article applies to ancillary spaces that contain an exhaust device, where the space is not within a <i>dwelling unit</i> in a house with a <i>secondary suite</i> and where the house with a <i>secondary suite</i> contains a fuel-fired <i>space-heating appliance</i> or fuel-fired <i>water-heating appliance</i> or other than <i>direct-vented</i> or <i>mechanically vented</i> types.	
9.32.3.9.	Carbon Monoxide Alarms	Interconnected with all CO detectors in principal <i>suite</i> and <i>secondary suite</i> and common spaces.	
9.33.1.1.	Heating and Air Conditioning	Designed as per Section 9.33. and principal <i>suite</i> and <i>secondary suite</i> each with a separate source of heating and cooling.	
9.33.1.1.	Ducting	No interconnection between principal <i>suite</i> and <i>secondary suite</i> .	
9.33.3.1.	Indoor Design Temperature	22°C in living spaces, 18°C in ancillary spaces, 18°C in common <i>service rooms</i> , ancillary spaces and exits in houses with a <i>secondary suite</i> ; and 15°C in heated crawl spaces.	
9.33.4.3.	Heating System Control	Applies where a single heating systems serves a house with a <i>secondary suite</i> and requires individual controls to be provided in each <i>dwelling</i> served by the system.	
9.34.2.3.	Stairways	Three-way switches located at the head and foot of every stairway shall be provided to control at least one lighting outlet with fixture for stairways with four or more risers.	
9.36.1.3.	Compliance and Application	The application of energy efficiency to houses with or without a <i>secondary suite</i> would be with Subsection 9.36.5. and 9.36.7. forming part of Section 9.36. Energy Efficiency.	

*The National Building Code of Canada, the National Energy Code of Canada for Buildings, the National Plumbing Code of Canada and the National Fire Code of Canada are available for download in a digital format, free of charge from Codes Canada.

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Saskatchewan Secondary Suite Incentive Grant Program

For information on the Government of Saskatchewan Secondary Suite Incentive Grant Program (SSI) please contact the Ministry of Finance:

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<p>The Saskatchewan Ministry of Government Relations publishes this advisory to provide users with information on the topic contained herein. In case of conflict between <i>The Construction Codes Act</i> (the CC Act), <i>The Building Code Regulations</i> (the BC Regulations) and the National Building Code of Canada 2020 (NBC 2020) and this advisory, provisions of the CC Act and NBC 2020 shall apply.</p>	