

WHAT INSPECTORS CARE ABOUT MOST IN SUITES

The exact numbers a Calgary safety codes officer checks in a secondary suite — egress, ceiling height, fire separation, alarms, services — and why the “simple fixes” are the ones that break budgets.

APPLIES TO

Calgary, Alberta

PREPARED

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SERIES

Owner's Guides · 5 of 5

COMPANION

Guide No. 04 — Roadmap

01 TWO TRACKS, ONE DATE

MARCH 12, 2018

Every requirement in this guide comes in two versions: the full standard for **new** suites, and a reduced standard for suites that already existed before **March 12, 2018**. Which track you are on decides thousands of dollars — and the safety codes officer decides your track based on evidence you submit.¹

0.35 m² MINIMUM EGRESS WINDOW OPENING — NO DIMENSION UNDER 380 MM²	1.95 m MINIMUM CEILING HEIGHT (6'5"); 1.85 M (6'1") UNDER BEAMS AND DUCTS³	12.7 mm DRYWALL SMOKE-TIGHT BARRIER BETWEEN SUITE AND MAIN DWELLING, JOINTS TAPED⁴	2 BUILDING-PERMIT INSPECTION GATES: ROUGH-IN, THEN FINAL — TRADE PERMITS ADD THEIR OWN¹
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THE “EXISTING SUITE” STATUS IS EARNED, NOT ASSUMED

To qualify for the reduced track, all suite elements — bedroom, bathroom, kitchen with cooking facility, living area, and a private entrance — must have existed before March 12, 2018, proven with an owner declaration and dated photos. A “fundamental” renovation since then pushes the suite onto the full new-construction track. The officer can ask for more evidence if anything looks altered.¹

HOW TO READ THIS GUIDE

Walk through pages 2–4 with a tape measure before any contractor visits. Items marked **EXISTING** show the reduced standard for pre-2018 suites; everything else is the full standard. The self-check on page 5 condenses it into one list.

02 EGRESS WINDOWS — THE #1 FAILURE POINT

- ☐ **Opening size: at least 0.35 m² (3.8 sq ft), no dimension under 380 mm (15").**
Measured on the **unobstructed** opening, and it must open from inside without keys, tools, or special knowledge — a painted-shut or hardware-blocked window fails.²
- ☐ **Window wells: 760 mm (30") clearance in front of the window — 550 mm (21.5") for pre-2018 wells.**
EXISTING: the 550 mm relaxation often decides whether you must excavate and rebuild the well. Measure before pricing anything.⁵
- ☐ **Security bars and well covers: not allowed unless the City approves them case-by-case.**
Even then, they must open from inside without tools or keys.²
- ☐ **Decks and cantilevers above the window have their own clearances.**
Below a deck: 2.1 m headroom to the deck underside, or 760 mm with the window immediately beside the deck edge. Below a cantilever: 760 mm clearance, projection max 610 mm. A "fine" window can fail because of what is **above** it.²
- ☐ **Enlarging a foundation window can quietly become structural engineering.**
A single window may be up to 1.2 m wide; windows closer together than their average width count as one opening; all openings in a wall are capped at 25% of its length. Beyond that — stamped engineering drawings before permit.⁶

03 CEILING HEIGHT — THE BUDGET DECIDER

- ☐ **1.95 m (6'5") minimum over the suite; 1.85 m (6'1") permitted directly under beams and ducts.**
This is a codified provincial requirement — officers have no discretion to accept less. Measure at the **lowest** finished point, including under bulkheads.³
- ☐ **Stairs: 1.95 m headroom over stairs and landings; 1.85 m under beams/ducts crossing them.**
Suite doorways must fit doors at least 1,890 mm (6'2") high where the ceiling is at the 1.95 m minimum.³
- ☐ **If the ceiling is short, the fix is the floor — and it is expensive.**
Lowering a basement floor (underpinning/benching) typically runs \$15,000–35,000+ and is the single most common reason legalization budgets double.⁷

04 FIRE & SMOKE SEPARATION

- ☐ **A continuous smoke-tight barrier — not a full fire-rated assembly — is the standard for suites.**
Minimum 12.7 mm (½") drywall on both sides of separating walls and the underside of the floor-ceiling framing, all joints taped and sealed. The code writes this relaxation for suites directly, so it applies to both tracks.⁴
- ☐ **Doors in the separation: solid-core, at least 45 mm thick, self-closing.**
Doors separating suite from main dwelling also need a deadbolt — a keyed knob alone fails. In shared stairwells: a door at both top and bottom, neither opening over the stairs.⁸
- ☐ **The furnace / mechanical room gets the same barrier plus a solid, self-closing door.**
This is the most commonly missed area — especially ceilings of mechanical rooms finished before the suite was separated.⁴
- ☐ **Sound separation (new suites): STC 43 between units.**
Typically 150 mm (6") sound insulation in ceiling joists, resilient channel at 400 or 600 mm spacing, and 12.7 mm drywall — designed once, together with the smoke barrier.⁹

05 ALARMS — SMALL DOLLARS, ZERO TOLERANCE

- ☐ **Smoke and CO alarms must sound together across the whole house.**
Hardwired and interconnected between suite and main dwelling — one activates, all sound, in both units. Wireless interconnection of smoke alarms is acceptable only for listed devices (CAN/ULC-S531).¹⁰
- ☐ **Locations: every bedroom, every level, hallways serving bedrooms, mechanical room.**
CO alarms within 5 m (16 ft) of each bedroom and in the mechanical room. Adding any wired alarm requires an electrical permit.¹¹

06 HEATING & VENTILATION

- ☐ **New suites: the suite's duct system must be physically separate.**
Even with one furnace as the heat source, ducts may not interconnect the two units, and each unit needs its own temperature control.¹²
- ☐ **EXISTING: one shared heating and ventilation system is allowed.**
The relaxation that most often saves pre-2018 suites ~\$6,000 (the City's own benchmark for separating heat). Unused old ducts must still be removed or sealed; new intake and exhaust vents need 900 mm separation.¹³

07 SERVICES, ACCESS, AND SITE

- ☐ **Backwater valve: an existing valve serving both units no longer complies.**
A normally-open backwater valve may serve only **one** dwelling unit — once the suite legally becomes a separate unit, shared protection must be reconfigured. Commonly missed because the plumbing “already passed” years ago.¹⁴
- ☐ **Electrical: what a homeowner may touch is narrow.**
You may tie into an existing panel or add a sub-panel; only a licensed contractor may alter the main service or legalize wiring that is already concealed. The suite electrical load calculation sheet goes to the City before rough-in. Gas and HVAC work: licensed contractor only, always.¹⁵
- ☐ **Stairs, guards, handrails — retroactive on the suite's access route.**
Guards wherever the drop exceeds 600 mm (24"); handrails on interior stairs with more than 2 risers (more than 3 outside). Applies even in an older home that never had them.¹⁶
- ☐ **Windows near an exterior exit stair may need fire protection.**
Openings near the suite's unenclosed exit stair can require wired glass in fixed steel frames or glass block — an exterior renovation owners rarely price into “just a basement entrance.”¹⁷
- ☐ **Parking and address: one stall is still required; the suite gets its own address.**
The parking minimum was not eliminated citywide — relaxations exist (transit proximity, existing stalls). The dedicated address is used for emergency response and utilities.¹⁸

08 WHY “SIMPLE FIXES” BECOME EXPENSIVE

LOOKS LIKE	ACTUALLY IS	TYPICAL SCALE
“Put in a bigger window”	Cutting foundation concrete; engineering if over the 1.2 m / 25% wall limits; window well excavation	\$3,500–8,000+ each ¹⁹
“Raise the ceiling a bit”	Lowering the floor: underpinning or benching the foundation	\$15,000–35,000+ ⁷
“Add drywall for fire separation”	If ceilings are already finished: opening and redoing them, plus every joint taped and sealed	City benchmark \$4,000 ²⁰
“Share the furnace, it works fine”	New suites: full duct separation and controls	City benchmark \$6,000 ²⁰
“Finish the basement first, legalize later”	Rough-in must be inspected before walls close — concealed work gets opened up	Re-inspection \$327 ²¹

THE PATTERN BEHIND EVERY LINE ABOVE

Costs explode when compliance is checked **after** finishes are in. The cheapest inspection you will ever have is the tape-measure walk-through you do before construction starts — that is the order the City's own process assumes, and it is the order that protects your budget.

09 PRE-INSPECTION SELF-CHECK

WALK THROUGH WITH A TAPE MEASURE

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| ☐ Every basement bedroom window: opening ≥ 0.35 m ² , no side under 380 mm, opens without tools | ☐ Suite/main doors: solid-core 45 mm, self-closing, deadbolt |
| ☐ Window wells: ≥ 550 mm clear (existing) / 760 mm (new) | ☐ Alarms in both units sound together when one is triggered |
| ☐ Lowest ceiling point ≥ 1.95 m / 6'5" (1.85 m under beams/ducts) | ☐ CO alarm within 5 m of each bedroom + mechanical room |
| ☐ ½" drywall both sides of separation + ceiling, joints taped | ☐ Guards where drops exceed 600 mm; handrails on stairs |
| ☐ Furnace room: barrier complete, solid self-closing door | ☐ Parking stall identified; no unpermitted concealed wiring |

TWO ADMINISTRATIVE TRAPS

Starting work before the permit is issued **doubles the permit fee**. And anyone claiming to be a City inspector should be verifiable — City officers carry ID and drive marked vehicles; when in doubt, confirm through 311 before letting anyone in.^{21,22}

WANT THIS WALK-THROUGH DONE PROFESSIONALLY?

We do this assessment on real suites every week — with the City's current checklists, not last year's. Email or call to book a site visit: bring this checklist, and we'll walk the suite together — what would pass today, what wouldn't, and what the fixes realistically cost. Then, if you want, we manage the whole path — permits to registration (Guide No. 04).

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SOURCES — CURRENT AS OF JULY 12, 2026

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|--|---|---|
| 1 calgary.ca — existing secondary suites, advisory B23-003 (eligibility, evidence, inspections) | 8 Secondary Suites Guidebook — doors, deadbolts, shared stairwells | 15 Secondary Suites Guidebook — homeowner electrical limits; load calculation submission |
| 2 City of Calgary — Egress Window Guidelines; Secondary Suites Guidebook (current ed.) | 9 NBC(AE) 2023 — STC 43 / ASTC 40 sound separation for suites | 16 B23-003 — guards over 600 mm; handrail thresholds |
| 3 NBC 2023 Alberta Edition — suite ceiling heights (1.95 m / 1.85 m), stair headroom, door height | 10 NBC(AE) 2023; B23-003 — alarm interconnection requirements | 17 Secondary Suites Guidebook — protection of openings near exterior exit stairs |
| 4 NBC(AE) 2023 — smoke-tight barrier for suites (12.7 mm gypsum, sealed joints) | 11 Secondary Suites Guidebook — alarm locations; CO within 5 m of bedrooms | 18 Secondary Suites Guidebook / Land Use Bylaw — parking minimum and relaxations; suite addressing |
| 5 B23-003 (550 mm existing-well relaxation); Egress Guidelines / Guidebook (760 mm new) | 12 NBC(AE) 2023 — no interconnected ducts; individual temperature control | 19 Calgary contractor estimates — egress window installation (non-binding) |
| 6 Secondary Suites Guidebook — foundation opening limits; engineered drawings threshold | 13 City advisory — existing suites: shared heating allowed; 900 mm vent separation; SSIP benchmark | 20 calgary.ca — SSIP reimbursement benchmarks |
| 7 Calgary contractor estimates — basement underpinning/benching (non-binding) | 14 City plumbing advisory — backwater valves and secondary suites (NPC 2020) | 21 calgary.ca — 2026 Building & Trade Permit Fee Schedule |
| | | 22 Secondary Suites Guidebook — verifying inspector identity via 311 |