

# Protecting Vacant Business Properties

Vacant buildings both face and pose several unique risks that must be addressed by property owners to safeguard their properties. These risks include elevated exposure to criminal activities, water damage, maintenance concerns, fire hazards, pest infestation and environmental risks.

If a commercial property stays vacant for any period, it's crucial to protect the investment and prevent potential risks. Property owners must understand the potential dangers their vacant buildings might face as well as the hazards they might pose, regardless of how long they are closed.

This article explores essential protection measures for vacant buildings to ensure the safety of the premises and minimize the risk of potential hazards.

## Criminal Activity

Vacant and idle buildings can attract trespassers, vandals, thieves, and others who might conduct unlawful activity. Property owners should collaborate with local law enforcement agencies to inform them of the vacant status of the building and update them on any suspicious occurrences on the premises.

Property owners should invest in security measures, such as security guards, alarm systems, fencing, exterior patrols, security cameras and motion-activated lights. Alarm systems could be used on the windows and other entry points to alert a security company of any entry. Regardless, entry points must be locked.

Moreover, owners can implement measures that make it look like the building is occupied. This helps deter individuals from breaking in. Property owners should conduct regular inspections to make sure there are no signs of break-ins or re-keyed locks. These inspections should be frequent and never at the same time of the day.

## Water Damage

Water damage poses a threat to the integrity of a building. If unchecked, it can lead to rot, deterioration and structural compromise. Water that is absorbed by insulation will cause the insulation to be ineffective. In addition, wires or electrical outlets that are exposed to water can increase the risk of fire. Therefore, property owners should turn off water supplies to unused fixtures and systems. To protect against a water leak, water detection sensors can be installed to detect water in areas that it's not supposed to be in. Such a system should alert a property owner of a potential leak.

In the cold months, property owners should make sure to winterize the building if necessary and wrap outside pipes to prevent them from freezing and bursting. If owners are unable to winterize the building, then a minimum building temperature of 40 degrees Fahrenheit should be maintained to prevent freezing in areas where water is not shut off or where water-filled fire sprinkler systems are present. During harsh winter conditions, the roof should be monitored for excessive snow accumulation and ice dams. Internally, property owners should inspect for leaks and water stains.

Gutters should also be kept clear of debris and regular roof inspections should be conducted, particularly before and after storm seasons. After severe weather events, it's important to inspect the roof for signs of damage.

## Fire Hazards

Fire poses a significant threat to any structure, with increased risks in vacant buildings. Since vacant buildings do not have any occupancy, the combination of neglect, vandalism or arson and accumulation of combustible materials makes them more susceptible to fires.

Property owners should remove combustible items from the premises, maintain functional fire alarms, and verify the operability of fire sprinkler systems and water supplies. They should also perform regular inspections of sprinkler control valves to make sure they are in the open position. In addition, routine inspections of fire extinguishers and other fire-protection apparatuses are necessary to make sure everything is in working order and doesn't need maintenance or to be replaced. Quarterly testing of all fire-protection system alarms (including sprinkler control valves and water-flow alarms) is essential to verify their functionality.

Furthermore, property owners should notify the fire department of the building's vacancy. The fire department should have a general idea of the sprinkler systems and alarms and be given a tour of the facility so they are aware of where everything is located in case of an emergency. As a best practice, owners can give the fire department keys or a way to enter the facility in case of an emergency.

## Regular Maintenance

Regular maintenance of the property is essential to prevent it from looking abandoned to deter potential criminal activity, preserve the property value and prevent fire hazards. This includes consistent landscaping upkeep and removal of any litter. Property owners should also safeguard outdoor equipment, such as HVAC units, by securing them with protective cages. Regular property inspections by designated individuals are recommended to monitor the site. By monitoring the property and promptly resolving minor issues as they emerge, business and property owners can minimize the likelihood of expensive repairs, significant damage and a decrease in property value.

## Pest Infestation

Pests and vermin, such as insects and rodents, can infest vacant buildings. These pests usually infiltrate an empty structure via openings around unsealed utility conduits, pipe chases, inadequately sealed doors, and other gaps in the building's exterior. Even small openings can serve as entry points. Preventive measures include eliminating potential food and water sources for pests and conducting regular inspections for signs of infestation. Property owners should enlist professional pest control services if they are unable to manage it on their own.

## Environmental Risks

Environmental risks linked to vacant sites include mold, storage tanks, illegal dumping, asbestos, lead, soil and groundwater contamination, air and noise pollution, and improper waste storage. Inadequate upkeep, concrete fissures, deteriorated roofing, obstructed sewer lines and malfunctioning sprinkler systems can lead to water infiltration and mold proliferation. Mold thrives in warm and damp conditions, proliferating in areas like bathrooms, basements, beneath carpets, within walls, and HVAC ducts. It can easily spread throughout commercial structures and affect others.

Furthermore, weather-related incidents, such as flash floods, can worsen indoor water and mold problems and cause excessive surface water and silt runoff that impacts adjacent properties or bodies of water such as ponds, streams and rivers. Should a water body be affected, water quality as well as the surrounding plant and animal life (natural resources) are jeopardized. To prevent similar pollution risks, hazardous chemicals should be disposed of before the building becomes vacant so there is no concern of a chemical leak. These risks can be prevented and mitigated through a site pollution policy.

## Conclusion

If a commercial property stays vacant for any period, it's crucial to protect the investment and prevent potential risks. Property owners should start by notifying their insurance providers and ensuring adequate coverage for their commercial buildings. Because vacant properties can pose more risk for insurers, it's important for owners to make sure their insurance company is aware of the status of the property. Moreover, commercial property owners must understand how to prevent the dangers their vacant buildings might face, regardless of how long they remain closed.

By addressing potential vulnerabilities proactively, property owners can preserve the integrity of their assets, minimize liabilities and uphold their value in the long term.

For more risk management guidance, contact us today.

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