

City of Holyoke

Vacant Building Registry

Frequently Asked Questions

- **What is the current process?**

1. There is a self-report (45 days), complaint or code violation observation.
2. Board of Health will verify utility usage of the property.
3. If not in compliance, there will be a written notice to the property owner and an attached Vacant Building Registry Form.
4. The property is added to the Vacant Building Registry
5. Annually, The Vacant Building Registry Forms shall be sent by the Board of Health by October 15th.
6. All responses, offsets, rehab plans, and maintenance plans shall be submitted to the Board of Health by November 15th.

- 7. **Appeals & Deferrals**

- a. Between October 15th-November 15th, The Board of Health reviews submitted appeal documents to verify occupancy. Verified properties are removed and the fee is dismissed. Appealed properties that are unable to be verified triggers a scheduled appeal hearing.
 - b. Between October 15th- November 15th, The Building Commissioner reviews submitted rehab plans. If the plan is approved the annual fee is deferred. A denied plan or plan that requires more clarity may trigger additional requested information or an Appeal Hearing.
8. Board of Health schedules requested appeals with panel that is outlined in the city ordinance: Board of Health Director, Building Commissioner, and City Solicitors Office
 9. Approved Rehab Plans will receive written notice of deferral from the Building Commissioner.
 10. Liens: All properties on the registry that did not receive a deferral or are within the vacancy grace period (Commercial Properties) are subjected to the fees outlined in the City Ordinance.
 - a. Board of Health reviews all properties. Liens are omitted for all properties that have new property owners.

- **How can the Board of Health make the process better?**

Due to the quicker sale of residential properties, beginning in October of 2026, the Board of Health will be preemptively contacting the utility companies on behalf of residential properties that are assessed at a \$500 fee.

- **Why does the city have this ordinance?**

The ordinance was adopted primarily to combat the effects of blight on our community:

Sec 18-35 reads:

“The existence of such blighted and vacant properties contributes to the decline of city neighborhoods. It is further found that the existence of such blighted and vacant properties encourage temporary occupancy by transients, drug users and persons engaged in criminal activity; adversely affect the economic well being of the city and the health, safety and welfare of the residents of the city; and create significant costs to the city by virtue of the need for constant monitoring and frequent boarding and securing”.

- **How many properties are on the Vacant Building Registry?**

There are approximately 130 Vacant Properties registered in the city of Holyoke. Approximately 64 of those properties are commercial properties.

- **Is the vacant building registry a secret?**

No, all vacant properties listed in the registry are subject to public record requests.

- **How does the City of Holyoke determine if a building is vacant?**

Most cases, vacant buildings are found by neighborhood complaints or by visual code compliance issues. The Board of Health will often verify through utility companies that the building is vacant as defined in city ordinance:

Vacant building shall mean any commercial or industrial building in which no person or entity actually conducts a lawfully licensed business in such building; or any residential building in which no person lawfully resides in any part of the building; or a mixed use building in which neither a licensed business nor a lawful resident exists. Further, any building lacking active water, heat or electrical utility service or in which more than one half of the total exterior windows and doors are broken, boarded or open without a functioning lock shall be deemed "vacant."

The property is then added to the Vacant Building Registry.

- **If I leave my property for an extended period of time is my property considered vacant?**

The vacant building ordinance defines vacancy as a property lacking utilities, broken boarded windows, or a failure on behalf of the property owner to properly secure property from illegal entry. The ordinance also states that no property owner shall allow, create, maintain or cause blighted premises. To leave a residence for an extended period time without an effective plan to maintain that property in compliance with state law or local ordinance, the property owner on the registry will be given the option of appealing the status of vacancy at the property.

- **I bought my house this year and received a notice, what do I do?**

Residential (Not including 4+ Units) may notify the Board of Health of their circumstance and provide proof of occupancy through utility bills. If the property owner needs assistance, the Board of Health will reach out to the utility companies on their behalf. The Health Department will verify that the dwelling has been removed from the Vacant Building Registry.

- **I am a new owner and I provided proof of occupancy, do I still have to pay the fee?**

All properties with new owners, that have proven occupancy and verified by the Board of Health, will not have to pay the annual fee. The Board of Health will verify that their property has been removed from the Vacant Building Registry through correspondence electronic or US mail that the property is deemed occupied.

- Minimal or low usage of utilities may require a scheduled and appeal hearing to determine vacancy.

- **Where do the fees go and how are they used?**

All fees collected under the City of Holyoke ordinance sec 18-35 are collected in the Vacant Building Revolving Fund. This fund is used to bring blighted properties that are under the control of nonresponsive or absentee property owners into compliance.

- Common use of the fund is to the board and secure vacant property from illegal entry, remove graffiti, illegal dumping, and overgrown vegetation.
- In some cases, the fund can be used to offset the cost of demolition.

- **Why is this fund important?**

The collection of fees from the Vacant Building Registry is important because the fund is used in lieu of external funding sources or the City's general fund. This leaves funds available for vital community services that benefit the residents of Holyoke. Without this self-sustaining fund, each year, the mayor and city council would need to appropriate funds to alleviate code compliance issues of neglected vacant nuisance properties. Without the fund or registry, vacant buildings would add an additional financial burden to all taxpayers.

- **How does the Vacant Building Registry combat blight?**

Buildings that stay vacant for long periods of time, without maintenance, begin to become dilapidated. Failure on the part of the city to enforce code compliance on these properties will create a negative outcome. The building begins to bring down property values, attracts illegal activity, becomes a safety hazard to the community, becomes irreparable and finally must be demolished. If funds are not available for demolishing the property, the property stays vacant, consistently drawing our limited resources: Health, Police, Fire, Building, Economic Development, and Community Development.

- **Should the Vacant Building Registry include single family residential homes?**

All residential buildings that fall under the MA State Sanitary code are subject to possible receivership. In the event that a property owner is unable or unwilling to comply with state laws pertaining to Minimum Standards of Human Habitation, the city will motion for the court to appoint a receiver. Registering property, particularly noncommercial residential homes, before they become dilapidated is vital to the proactive role that we can take to decrease blight in the City of Holyoke.

Examples that showcase the importance of monitoring Vacancy



