Inspection Services

Building and Property Standards

Property value is a driver of community vitality. Aging structures require owner maintenance and investment to prevent deterioration from occurring. Even a small percentage of structures showing neglect can lead to a perception of blight beginning. The city will continue to evolve and develop proactive property maintenance programs to help encourage owners to maintain their property values. Developing these programs and streamlining processes will assist home owners and businesses to remodel, expand, and reduce energy usage leading to enhanced public health and safety throughout the city.

Building Inspections

New construction and remodeling is regulated by the Minnesota Construction Code and city ordinances, which include regulations for building, plumbing, electrical, mechanical, energy, and several other aspects of building construction. Permits are required for construction work and are issued after application and review of the proposed work by the city inspection staff. On average 8,000 construction permit applications are processed each year and over 20,000 inspections are performed annually.

The city also serves as a representative in collecting information and fees for State agencies such as the Minnesota Department of Labor and Industry and the Metropolitan Council. A state surcharge is applied to all construction permits and sewer access charges are calculated for the potential additional load on sewage treatment for the metropolitan area when new buildings or more intensive uses are proposed.

Property Maintenance Program

The city has a comprehensive Property Maintenance Code requiring all buildings be maintained in compliance with the building code they were constructed under to ensure that structural and life safety components are not changed or removed.

These inspections on housing and commercial properties also enforce safety, health, and fire codes, thereby creating and maintaining a livable and viable community.

Point-of-Sale Inspections

Since the first housing inspection in 1972, the Inspections Department has established a model point-of- sale inspection program which has the sole purpose of maintaining the housing stock to quality standards. The city requires property inspections whenever there is a transfer of ownership of any building. A commercial, industrial or residential property owner must apply for the certificate and have an inspection of the building and property before selling the property. Inspectors verify the property meets the Maintenance Code and issue a certificate if in compliance. A code violation occurring from building deterioration or improper modification must be corrected before the seller is issued the certificate. In many building transactions the buyer can enter into an agreement with the city known as a Temporary Property Maintenance Certificate, acknowledging the deficiencies and assuming responsibility to resolve them within a specified time.

Inspections provide an opportunity to verify installation and working condition of life safety elements, such as working smoke and carbon monoxide detectors in all dwelling units. These important and relatively easy to install life safety items have been the most common deficiency identified during inspection programs.

Rental Licensing and Inspections

All dwelling units ranging from single family to apartment complexes that are not owner occupied must be licensed annually. The multi-housing rental inspections program began in the late 1970s and the one- and two- family residential inspections program began in 2004. These two programs were established to ensure landlords as well as owner-occupied home owners comply with the same property maintenance code. Overall, the growing rental inspection program helps ensure uniformity in the inspection of 324 multi-family buildings with over 9,000 individual units, 900 units of duplexes/townhomes, and 770 single family homes.

Vacant houses are considered non-owner occupied and must be licensed and inspected as for rental properties to ensure they remain secure and maintained.

Inspections of rental units and common spaces are completed at least once every two years to verify compliance with the Property Maintenance Code. Inspections of individual units are also performed if a tenant calls with concerns over property condition. The licensing program also includes provisions focused on improving community livability through enforcing crime-free provisions. This program is involves a joint operation between Inspections and the Police departments. Property owners are required to have all tenants sign a crime-free lease addendum. Continued public nuisance behavior or criminal activity will result in the owner being notified by Police staff and requested to develop a plan with the tenant to change behavior. Failure of a tenant to comply may lead to the owner being required to terminate the lease. The program was initiated in 2008 and proved helpful in reducing activities which may lead to deterioration of a property and the community.

Property Maintenance Inspection

Property maintenance service is essential to the St. Louis Park community. The city receives approximately 600 complaints annually on single family homes, multi-family buildings, commercial and industrial, railroad and public right of way properties. The types of complaints range from trash, litter, garbage, graffiti, junk vehicles, broken windows, unpainted structures to unsafe structures, illegal dumping and hazardous waste disposal.

During the past decade, the city has conducted three separate city-wide surveys in all of the residentially zoned districts resulting in 700 homes now in compliance. In addition two commercial and industrial district surveys were conducted, resulting in 200 additional commercial buildings complying with the property maintenance code. By conducting these surveys, the city has demonstrated a proactive approach to the community as well as a quick and consistent response approach to complaints.

The city has utilized a low interest loan incentive programs for home improvements in conjunction with city-wide property evaluations to help residents with limited means maintain their properties. This approach has been successful in reducing the enforcement perception of large scale evaluations and generates positive improvements in overall property condition visible to the generalcommunity.

Nuisance Complaints

The Inspections Department addresses nuisances which potentially affect the health, safety and well-being of the community. Junk and garbage may serve as refuge for insects and rodents which carry communicable disease, and therefore pose a health risk. Graffiti adds to an overall feeling of decline in an area. If not removed promptly, it can be interpreted as a sign of low community pride. Inspectors routinely respond to complaints and work with offenders to remedy nuisance situations. Several hundred complaints about possible code violations are received each year through direct contact or on the internet based mystlouispark.org for reporting issues or maintenance items within the city.

Integration with other programs

Verifying properties are well maintained is also accomplished as a component of other programs. Licensing of various businesses such as restaurants, hotels, environmental emissions and others include provisions that buildings and properties must be maintained per the Maintenance Code. Verification is done during the regular annual inspection for these businesses. Other opportunities are provided during regular Fire Department inspection of commercial building approximately every two years.

Air, Water and Soil Hazards

Air Quality

Since the passage of the federal Clean Air Act in 1963, air pollution has been more widely understood by the public as an important issue for health and quality of life reasons. The Minnesota Legislature has passed its own version of the Clean Air Act, an important step to comply with federal regulations. Since 2001, there have been several air-quality related pollution alerts in the Twin Cities metropolitan area. These alerts typically occur during the summer months, but can occur year- round. Most frequently, these alerts are related to high levels of ground-level ozone (smog) and fine particulate matter (soot).

Within St. Louis Park, the major impact to air pollution is emissions from vehicle travel. There are also several industries holding permits from the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency to allow emissions of certain chemicals into the atmosphere. These emissions do not generally result in complaints to the city, however.

Asbestos

Asbestos was used in many construction applications until the mid-1970s. The mineral fiber was added to a variety of products such as shingles, tile, siding, and insulation to strengthen them and to provide heat insulation and fire resistance. Asbestos was found to be a potential health hazard in the mid-1970s because elevated levels of air-borne asbestos fibers, when inhaled, increase the risk of several lung diseases including the development of lung cancer.

The presence of asbestos in a home or building is not necessarily hazardous, however. The danger is that asbestos materials may become damaged and release fibers into the air. After identifying the potential health hazards of asbestos, the State of Minnesota developed guidelines and requirements for the removal of asbestos from many buildings, especially from school buildings. Removal itself can be dangerous and requires special clothing and the use of respirators to limit exposure to asbestos fibers which are easily airborne during demolition.

The city's involvement in asbestos is to provide residents with awareness of the hazards associated with handling asbestos materials including proper removal techniques and disposal.

Carbon Monoxide

Each year, many persons in Minnesota require medical attention as a result of carbon monoxide poisoning. Carbon monoxide results from incomplete burning of any carbon-containing fuel, and is potentially a serious health hazard. Carbon monoxide, like oxygen, is colorless, odorless, tasteless, and non-irritating, and it is readily absorbed by red blood cells replacing oxygen in the body and resulting in damage to body tissue.

Carbon monoxide may become a problem within a home when fuel-utilizing devices such as furnaces, water heaters, or gas dryers are improperly adjusted or vented. Carbon monoxide may also be a problem in enclosed parking facilities. The Inspections Department licenses and inspects all enclosed parking facilities annually. In addition, Property Maintenance Inspectors examine furnaces and gas appliances for proper ventilation. Informational pamphlets and ensuring carbon monoxide detectors are installed in all residential dwellings reduces the likelihood of carbon monoxide poisoning.

Radon

Radon is an odorless, colorless, tasteless gas that is produced by the natural decay of uranium and radium in the soil.

Minnesota has widespread low grade uranium and radium deposits. Radon levels above the 4 pc/l recommended by the EPA are found in one out of three homes in Minnesota. Radon can enter a home anywhere there is an opening between the home and the soil as well as through some solid material.

Exposure to radon is the second leading cause of lung cancer deaths in the United States behind cigarette smoking.

The Inspections Department is committed to increasing an awareness of the potential health risks associated with radon. Radon home testing kits have been made available at a minimal cost to all residents. Inspectors will meet with homeowners at no charge to help them determine the sources of radon in their homes and will explain mitigation options. Also available is information about how radon entry can be stopped relatively easily and inexpensively.

VOCs

In 2007, the United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) began an investigation regarding volatile organic compounds (VOCs) contamination in St. Louis Park. VOCs refer to a variety of chemicals that are by-products of industrial processes or found in household products that can have health impacts on respiratory and immune systems. Contamination was found in the ground water in certain parts of the city. The concern was the potential for VOC vapors permeating through the soil and accumulating inside residential homes and businesses causing human exposure. As a precaution, the EPA worked with the city to test buildings and implement mitigation measures in over forty buildings where elevated VOC levels were identified.

Noise

Municipal codes prohibit noises above certain decibel levels because loud noises potentially impose significant health hazards and disturb peace and quietude. Hearing loss is the most common health problem associated with elevated noise levels, but excessive noise has been found to change heart rates, elevate blood pressure and increase blood cholesterol. Excessive noise can also become a nuisance that can interfere with our normal residential and business activities. The Inspections Department enforces the noise ordinances codes to minimize excessive community noise.

Wells

Significant well installations (development) occurred in St. Louis Park prior to the time when a municipal water supply was available. Early properties used private wells as a water source. Although construction of infrastructure improvements to provide municipal water began in the 1930s with the goal to connect water to every property, there were likely over 5,000 private wells drilled in the city. In spite of the fact that all residential properties have access to a public water supply, many residential wells are still being used for watering lawns. Because wells are a potential source of unsafe drinking water, ground water contamination, and even contamination of the municipal water supply, the Minnesota Health Department requires all unused wells to be cement-sealed and capped or registered with the state. Inspectors are making incremental progress toward sealing wells as houses are sold. New information and the ability to map those locations where wells are likely to exist have improved the progress.

State Plumbing code requires backflow prevention devices on systems and devices with a potential to contaminate the public drinking water system. The Department of Inspections monitors wells, backflow prevention devices, and inspects all new plumbing installations. The Inspections Department ensures that commercial and residential properties with boilers, irrigation systems, and industrial process utilize the correct backflow prevention device and perform annual testing to ensure these protection devices are operating properly.

Lead

The lead found in the environment in St. Louis Park generally had its genesis either in leaded gasoline or in lead-based paints. Lead was used in gasoline to improve performance and mileage in automobiles and resulted in both air-borne and soil-borne lead. Lead was also used in oil based paints, especially in red and white paint to improve coverage and durability. In the late 1970s, lead was identified as a health risk and was eliminated from paint. Leaded gasoline was also phased out as automobile engines were redesigned to burn unleaded gas.

Many residents have elevated lead levels in the soil around their house as a result of deteriorating lead-based paint. Others living near highly traveled roadways may have exterior high lead levels in the soil close to the roadway caused by leaded gasoline.

Lead can become a health risk if ingested or inhaled. The population most vulnerable to health risk from lead is women of child-bearing age and children under six. Elevated lead levels in the soil are not dangerous if proper precautions are practiced.

Lead based paints inside the home are potentially hazardous because of lead levels in dust which forms as paint deteriorates over time. Potential solutions to lead contamination range from expensive measures, such as soil replacement or total removal of lead-based paint, to less expensive measures, which include paint encapsulation and proper vegetative cover. The test for determining health risk is not the amount of lead in the environment, but the amount of lead that has entered the blood stream. Children with elevated blood lead levels can be treated effectively medically.

Because the potential for lead paint exists in literally every home constructed or painted prior to 1979, the State of Minnesota has recommended that every child be tested annually in order to monitor the blood lead levels. In addition, education can play an effective role in informing residents about how to reduce health risks. The city is pursuing an active role in informing the public about the risks and abatement methods for dealing with lead in the environment. Home inspections also reveal whether peeling paint is an issue that requires attention. Do it yourself test kits for lead can be purchased at local hardware store and are easy to use.

Contaminated Sites

Environmental pollution is monitored, regulated and/or treated by the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency (MPCA), the Minnesota Department of Health, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), the Minnesota Department of Public Safety, the Hennepin Conservation District, and others. At this point, partial inventories of polluted sites exist, but much of this information is incomplete and difficult to assemble. A more complete inventory of polluted sites could assist the city in designing its policies and programs. Examples of polluted sites in St. Louis Park are listed in the table on the following page.

A number of private and municipal plans are in place to remediate environmental contamination. The city continues to support solutions to clean up the environment and attempt to return “brownfield” sites to productive use.

Table 7-3. Contaminated Sites

TYPE OF POLLUTION	DESCRIPTION
Groundwater Pollution, e.g. Reilly Tar and Chemical Corp. site (Superfund Site)	The Reilly Tar & Chemical Corporation operated a wood preserving plant on this site from 1917 to 1972. The process involved the distillation of coal tar to produce creosote that was then used in treating lumber. Over the years, both coal tar and creosote impacted the site and contaminated four City wells. As a result the site was placed on the state and federal Superfund list. In order to control and properly remediate the site the City of St. Louis Park purchased it in 1972. Since that time, portions of the site (about 30% of the area) were developed for multi-family and commercial purposes. The remaining portions of the site were converted into parkland and play fields (Oak Hill Park). Monitoring and testing of groundwater continues.
Lead Pollution, e.g. National Lead Company site (Superfund site)	National Lead Co. operated a lead smelter on its site between 1940 and 1982. As a result, lead contaminated the air and soil, and was suspected of causing elevated levels of lead in the ground water. National Lead Co. agreed to participate in stabilization and capping of the site, and long- term ground water monitoring. In 2005, Real Estate Recycling (RER), the St. Louis Park Economic Development Authority and several other public agencies worked together to acquire this infamous site along with several neighboring blighted properties and successfully implemented a $20 million clean-up and redevelopment plan. The resulting Highway 7 Corporate Center is an attractive, 80,000 square foot office-showroom facility which has attracted national-credit tenants and several hundred high quality jobs and significant tax base. In February 2008, RER received a Certificate of Completion from the MPCA for successfully completing its Response Action Plan for the site.
Land fill at Park Nicollet clinic site	This site was originally mined for sand and gravel, and subsequently used as a dump site. Land fill operations ceased in the early 1960s after accumulating garbage to a depth of approximately 30 feet. A medical clinic was constructed on this site, and in the early 1990s a medical office building and parking structure were added. As decomposition occurred, methane gas and other organic compounds were emitted, and the soil has shifted and settled. The shifting soil necessitated substantial reconstruction of one building on the site. The clinic entered into the VIC (Voluntary Investigation & Cleanup) program with the MPCA and continues to monitor the methane.
Underground gasoline storage tanks	In 1987, the State of Minnesota initiated a program to detect and clean up gasoline leaks and spills from underground gasoline storage tanks. Such spills occur most frequently in locations where equipment is fueled, maintained and stored, such as gas stations, service stations, bus garages, or equipment storage facilities. Under this program, more stringent controls on storage tank installation and maintenance have become mandatory, and funding has been allocated for cleanup costs through the State's Petrofund.
Dry cleaning operations	The dry cleaning process uses perchloroethylene, a chemical solvent, and hydrocarbon-based solvents. With dry cleaners in neighborhoods and malls, dry cleaners are one of the largest groups of chemical users that come into direct contact with the public. Because of the potential health and environmental concerns associated with dry cleaning solvents, the State assists in cleanup of soil, groundwater, and surface water contamination through its Drycleaner Fund.