

Mitigating Potential Risk Exposures in Vacant and Idle Properties

Idle and vacant properties are a common occurrence due to plant closings, layoffs, strikes or slowdowns, particularly when the economy takes a downturn. If neglected, these properties may have increased susceptibility to losses caused by arson, weather-related events, burglary and vandalism.

Fire can be one of the greatest concerns and every effort should be made to eliminate combustible loading and to maintain fire protection systems. Frozen water lines can also be a significant cause of loss when building heat is not maintained -- some vacant buildings have burned to the ground due to sprinkler systems being shut off to prevent the lines from freezing.

As these facilities are often neglected, standard loss prevention measures may not be implemented during extreme weather events such as flood, surface water, freezing temperatures and wind. These buildings may be left constantly unattended and are often not provided with the proper preventative measures to manage their respective natural hazard exposures.

Consider the following precautionary tips for idle and vacant properties:

▪ **Maintain Active Sprinkler Systems**

- Keep automatic sprinkler systems in service
- Alarms should be constantly monitored unless there is 24-hour security on site
- Maintain building temperatures above 40°F (4.5°C) to prevent freezing of wet sprinkler systems
- If it is not feasible to maintain a minimum temperature of 40°F (4.5°C), convert wet sprinkler systems to dry-pipe or non-freeze systems
- Conduct required maintenance, inspection and testing in accordance with the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) standards to ensure reliable operation
- Lock and supervise sprinkler control valves in the open position to deter arsonists from tampering

▪ **Ignition Sources**

- Restrict hot work and smoking
- Use a formal hot work permit system if this form of activity is necessary
- Isolate all non-essential utilities, such as electricity and gas, if not required for building heat

▪ **Eliminate Unnecessary Combustible Loading**

- Eliminate or reduce combustible materials stored inside buildings, as these materials provide ready fuel for fire
- Remove all waste and clean oil/dust deposits and remove all ignitable liquids
- Eliminate or reduce combustible yard storage which may unnecessarily expose building structures
- Keep remaining combustible yard storage away from perimeter fencing, buildings and plants to reduce the potential for malicious ignition
- Maintain vegetation, especially around fire service equipment, to ensure clear access by emergency responders

▪ **Contractor Management:**

- Supervise outside contractors closely, especially when properties are idle

▪ **Security**

- Provide external security features to deter potential arsonists, burglars, vandals and persons with malicious intent
- Provide adequate lighting to cover all sides of the building, including parking areas
- Provide quality fencing around the property with locked gates
- Eliminate potential hiding places, and trim or remove foliage that obstructs the view of the building from the street
- Provide quality locks to all doors, windows and roof hatches
- Eliminate easy access to roofs
- Provide security bars on vulnerable windows or securely board or block them, particularly for windows at ground level and easily accessible upper levels

▪ **Inspections**

- Conduct regular inspections of the building and perimeter, at least weekly, to check for breaches in security
- Rectify any security breaches immediately

- Record inspection details
- **Burglar Alarms & Watch Service**
 - Provide electronic surveillance (i.e. CCTV camera system) with adequate coverage of interior and exterior areas and off-site monitoring
 - Install a burglar alarm system with suitable intrusion devices to protect buildings/rooms storing valuable contents that are susceptible to theft, buildings in localities with high crime rates or a history of burglary, or to prevent against arson
 - Monitor alarms remotely or utilize a watch service with random recorded rounds
 - Provide suitable training and supervision to ensure effectiveness
 - Familiarize any on-site security personnel with the operation of fire protection equipment and alarm systems
- **Access Control**
 - Post contact numbers at the main entrance
 - Escort visitors and require them to sign in and out of the building
- **Local Authorities**
 - Inform the local police and fire department when a property becomes unoccupied
 - Provide the fire department with keys for easy access and conduct preplanning as required
 - Familiarize the fire department with all automatic protection and alarm systems that will be kept in service
 - Provide emergency contact numbers
- **Heat**
 - Provide adequate heating to prevent freezing of fire protection equipment, or other equipment vulnerable to freezing, and to prevent against rapid deterioration of the building structure or contents
 - Routinely inspect heating systems
 - Monitor temperature remotely



▪ Detection

- Install detection systems in areas not provided with automatic sprinklers when the combustible loading is appreciable and the combustibles cannot be eliminated or the idle/vacant building condition is expected to exist for an extended duration

▪ Strikes

- Special planning is required to deal with strikes, particularly when there is a high probability for violence or malicious property damage
- Key responsibilities and duties need to be initially defined
- Staffing limitations, site access, communication methods and required provisions must be planned in advance

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Sources:

NFPA 1: Fire Code, Section 10.12, Seasonal and Vacant Buildings and Premises

IAAI Field Manual – Evaluation of Vacant and Abandoned Properties

U.S. Fire Administration – Basic Evaluation Procedures for Abandoned and Vacant Buildings

https://www.usfa.fema.gov/downloads/pdf/arson/basic_evaluation_procedures_for_vacant_bldgs.pdf

U.S. Fire Administration – Securing Vacant and Abandoned Buildings

https://www.usfa.fema.gov/prevention/outreach/arson_prevention_abandoned_bldgs_community_actions.html

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