

News Flash - Fire

Saint Paul Starts Implementation of New Ordinance to Prevent Gas Explosions in Vacant Buildings

A new ordinance that will help reduce the chance a vacant building could explode from natural gas build up went into effect this month. The ordinance requires that owners of vacant buildings needing significant repairs – listed as category II and III structures in Saint Paul – install an excess gas flow valve on the home.

The excess gas flow valve is a technological solution that allows owners to keep homes heated while still ensuring the neighborhood and fire safety personnel are safe from the potential of a gas explosion. If the flow of gas into the house exceeds a level necessary for the building's gas appliances, the valve shuts off gas to the house.

"There is much the city has done to resolve the issue of vacant buildings that has burdened the city and our neighborhoods the past few years. We are working hard to attract new home owners who will become active members in the community," Mayor Chris Coleman said. "Until we can increase home ownership for people throughout the city, we will take these proactive steps to protect residents and the community from unnecessary harm."

"We're taking this step now so we don't have to explain in the future why a vacant house has exploded and caused great pain and suffering for the immediate neighborhood," said Bob Kessler, director of the Department of Safety and Inspections.

The ordinance requires that in vacant category II and III buildings, the owner do one of three things:

- Winterize the home including shutting off the gas supply;
- Install the excess gas flow valve; or
- Have open building renovation permits.

This is the first known ordinance of its kind to go into effect in Minnesota targeting vacant buildings. The ordinance was crafted with help from the real estate community who wanted vacant homes to have access to heat in order to be a more sellable property. For owners who do not install the valve, the city will install one for them, charging \$375 plus assessment fees.

"Vacant houses can fill up with gas without anybody knowing it until it's too late," said Saint Paul Fire Marshal Steve Zaccard. "There's a very serious risk of a vacant building exploding when firefighters are just arriving. This ordinance will undoubtedly prevent serious injuries and deaths to firefighters and nearby residents."

Letters to the affected property owners begin going out Jan. 15.

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