

Underground storage tanks

What you need to know

If you're listing or selling a single family home, townhouse or condominium apartment built before 1957, chances are there will be an underground oil tank on the property.

That's because many homes in the Greater Vancouver area were originally heated by furnace oil. The tanks were usually located in backyards and were filled with sand or capped when natural gas became available.

Right now, there is no accurate data available on the number of tanks and their exact location in the Greater Vancouver area. What we do know is that if they haven't been removed, they're there.

Realtors beware. Underground storage tanks, even if capped and filled with sand, pose significant risks, says Doug Roberts, manager, Environmental Protection Branch, City of Vancouver. "Tanks corrode and rust."

Roberts explains that any remaining oil can leach into the ground and into the drainage system. "It can flow onto neighbouring property, into the storm sump and waterways including ditches and streams. It can contaminate water and pose a hazard to wildlife."

In the City of Vancouver, *Fire by-law no. 8191* (sec. 4.10.3) and the *Sewer and Watercourse by-law no. 8093* (sec. 5.3) both require that tanks that have been out of service for two years or will not be reused, must be removed.

In the other 21 villages, towns, cities and regional districts covered by the Real Estate Board of Vancouver, the *BC Fire Code* requires (sec. 4.10.3.1):

"when underground storage tanks have no further use or have been out of service for two years, such tanks, together with connecting piping and dispensers, shall... be removed from the ground."

John Poole, Lieutenant, Fire & Rescue Services for the City of Vancouver, recommends that property owners hire a contractor experienced in tank removal. "Before any work is done, you must obtain a permit issued by the Fire Prevention Department and you must follow all conditions noted on the permit."

Removal process

- Oil remaining in the tank should be pumped out and taken to a recycling/disposal facility.
- The tank must be removed.
- The soil must be assessed for contamination. If contamination is present, soil and groundwater must be properly remediated, which may include complete removal.

- The property owner must get a letter from the removal company detailing the removal process, what was pumped out of the tank, a receipt from the facility where the tank was taken to and the amount of dirt brought in. It must also include photos.

Typical situations

1 There is a home for sale. Both the buyer and seller know there is an underground storage tank. The buyer agrees to buy the property. Who is liable to remove it? *The property owner is responsible for tank removal.*

2 Both the buyer and seller know about the tank. The buyer says the law requires the seller to remove it. What does the seller have to do? What happens if the buyer reports it? *The property owner is responsible for removing the tank. If someone reports the tank, the City of Vancouver will respond by sending a letter outlining time periods for removal. If the property owner does not comply, the city is authorized to prosecute.*

3 A property contains an underground storage tank, decommissioned 10 years ago in compliance with the law at that time, which required homeowners to remove contents and fill with sand. What is the position now on this tank? *The tank must meet current bylaw requirements, which means it must be removed.*

4 What happens if a property owner is demolishing a home and finds a tank? *The tank must meet current bylaw requirements, which means it must be removed.*

For more information

Visit the REBGV homepage on realtorlink.ca under government relations – issues – underground storage tanks or call:

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