

TOWN of HAMILTON, MASSACHUSETTS -- TOWN BYLAWS

BYLAW FOR THE IMPROVEMENT OF BLIGHTED OR UNSAFE STRUCTURES OR PROPERTY AND THE MAINTENANCE OF VACANT BUILDINGS - DRAFT 2.28.2018

1. AUTHORITY AND PURPOSE

Pursuant to the general powers granted to towns by Article 89 of the Amendments to the Massachusetts Constitution, and the specific powers granted by Massachusetts General Laws, Chapter 139, Sections 1-3A, this Bylaw is adopted for the prevention of any unreasonable interference with the common interest of the general public in maintaining decent, safe, and sanitary structures. The provisions of this Bylaw shall be applicable to any building or structure or property that meets any one of the three sets of conditions set forth herein under the definitions of “Blighted Structure or Property”, “Unsafe Structure or Property,” or “Vacant Buildings”.

2. DEFINITIONS

A. Building - A structure, whether portable or fixed, with exterior walls or firewalls and a roof, built, erected or framed, of a combination of any materials, to form shelter for persons, animals, or property.

B. Structure - A combination of materials, whether wholly or partially level with, above or below the surface of the ground, whether permanent or temporary, assembled at a fixed location to give support, shelter, or enclosure such as a building (see above), framework, retaining wall, platform, bin, fence, parking area, sign, flagpole, or mast for antenna or the like.

C. Enforcement Authority – This Bylaw shall be enforced by the Building Commissioner or his qualified designee.

D. Interested Parties - In connection with the enforcement and notification requirements of this Bylaw, Interested Parties are: the Enforcement Authority; any Responsible Party; owners and occupants of property abutting the subject property; owners and occupants of property directly opposite the subject property on any public or private street or way; and a person filing a complaint under this Bylaw.

E. Occupant - A person who occupies real property with the consent of the owner as a lessee, tenant at will, licensee, or otherwise. The singular use of the term includes the plural when the context so indicates.

F. Owner - Every person who alone or jointly or severally with others (a) has legal title to any building, structure or property; or (b) has care, charge, or control of any such building structure or property in any capacity including but not limited to agent, executor, executrix,

administrator, administratrix, trustee or guardian of the estate of the holder of legal title; or (c) is a mortgagee in possession; or (d) is an agent, trustee or other person appointed by the courts.

G. Responsible Party - The owner or occupant (in the case of real property) of property that is the subject of proceedings under this Bylaw. The singular use of the term includes the plural when the context so indicates.

3. BLIGHTED STRUCTURE OR PROPERTY

Blighted is a condition of structure or property that by reasonable determination displays physical deterioration that renders the structure unfit for human habitation, in need of major maintenance or repair, or lacks ventilation, light or sanitation facilities, and that contributes to detrimental effects to safety or health and unreasonably interferes with the common interest of the general public in maintaining decent, safe, and sanitary structures. This definition of the term “blighted” is based on Massachusetts General Laws Chapters 121A and 121B and the implementing regulations which provide guidance regarding the definition of blighted structures. Blighted does not constitute a condition that merely adversely affects property values. The term blighted includes, but is not limited to:

- (a) property having deteriorated roofs, foundations, walls, or floors, including broken or inadequately secured windows or doors;
- (b) burned structures not otherwise lawfully habitable or usable;
- (c) property that attracts or harbors vermin or rodents or wild animals; or
- (d) garbage and rubbish.

4. UNSAFE STRUCTURE OR PROPERTY

Unsafe is a condition of a structure or structures or personal property that exposes persons to unreasonable risk of injury or harm, or exposes property to unreasonable risk of damage, loss or destruction.

5. VACANT BUILDINGS

Vacant buildings or structures are ones which (a) are or will be unoccupied, i.e., not inhabited or lived in, by a Responsible Party for a period of one-hundred-and-eighty (180) consecutive days or more and (b) which appear to manifest blighted or unsafe conditions as defined in Sections 3 and 4, and (c) for which the Responsible Party has failed to do any of the following:

- (a) comply with all applicable sanitary, building, and fire codes and orders issued pursuant thereto;
- (b) secure the premises to prevent unauthorized entry and exposure to the elements;
- (c) maintain the premises in a manner that ensures their external/visible maintenance, including but not limited to the maintenance of major systems, the removal of trash and debris, and the

upkeep of lawns, shrubbery, and other landscape features;
(d) repair or replace broken windows or doors within thirty (30) days. Boarding up any doors or windows is prohibited except as a temporary measure for no longer than thirty (30) days, and;
(e) for properties vacant for six months or more at which the utilities have been shut off, remove or cut and cap such utilities to prevent accidents.

6. VIOLATIONS

If the Enforcement Authority is informed of or has reason to believe that blighted or unsafe conditions, as defined in Sections 3 and 4, or that vacant buildings, as defined in Section 5, exist on any real property in the Town, he may make or cause to be made an investigation of the facts, including an inspection of the property where the condition may exist. In making such inspection, the Enforcement Authority shall have such right of access to premises that may be lawfully exercised by him under the laws and constitution of the Commonwealth and/or of the United States.

7. PROCEDURES FOR ENFORCEMENT

A. Procedures – During his investigation of the matter, the Enforcement Authority shall make reasonable efforts to consult with the Responsible Party for the purpose of obtaining voluntary compliance with this Bylaw before initiating any enforcement action.

If, after inspection, the Enforcement Authority confirms the existence of blighted or unsafe conditions or vacant buildings in violation of this Bylaw and the Responsible Party fails to voluntarily comply, he shall issue a Notice of Violation and may make and issue such Orders as he deems necessary to correct or eliminate the blighted or unsafe conditions or obtain compliance with the requirements for vacant buildings. Said Notice and Orders shall be in writing and shall be served upon all Responsible Parties as can be determined after reasonable inquiry.

Any Interested Party who has filed a written complaint of blighted or unsafe conditions or vacant buildings to the Enforcement Authority upon which complaint the Enforcement Authority has determined that the conditions do not exist, or the Enforcement Authority has taken action that the Interested Party claims is inadequate, shall have a right to a review of the matter by the Town Manager. At the request of such an Interested Party, the Town Manager shall confer with the Enforcement Authority and may confer with other appropriate agencies of Town government such as the Council on Aging, Assessors Department, and Building Department. The Town Manager shall make a decision and recommend appropriate action in writing to the Interested Parties, the Responsible Parties, the Enforcement Authority, and the Board of Selectmen.

Any person aggrieved by the decision and recommendation of the Town Manager may request a hearing before the Board of Selectmen. Said request shall be in writing and received by the Board of Selectmen within ten (10) business days of issuance of the Town Manager's decision. A copy of the hearing request shall also be delivered to the complainant, if any, and to all

Interested Parties. It shall be the responsibility of the person requesting the hearing to show that all Interested Parties have been notified of the request. If no such request is received within the time specified herein, the order of the Enforcement Authority shall be final.

A request for hearing shall not constitute a stay of the Enforcement Authority's Order unless the Enforcement Authority so orders.

Upon receipt of a timely request, the Board of Selectmen shall convene a public hearing, which may include an examination of any complainant or Responsible Party, under oath, to determine whether conditions under this Bylaw exist. Based on the evidence and testimony presented at said public hearing, the Board of Selectmen may affirm the Enforcement Authority's Order, reverse and nullify the Order, or issue any such Order as it deems necessary to ensure the protection of public safety and/or eliminate blighted or unsafe conditions. The determination of the Board of Selectmen after a hearing shall be final.

Fines for non-compliance with the Enforcement Authority's or Board of Selectmen's Order may be assessed as a non-criminal disposition pursuant to M.G.L. Chapter 40, Section 21D and Article XIII of the Town's Bylaws in the following amounts:

- i. First offense, \$100.00
- ii. Second offense, \$200.00
- iii. Third and successive offenses, \$300.00 each

Each violation of this Bylaw shall constitute a separate offense. Each day that any such violation continues shall constitute a separate offense.

The Enforcement Authority may require that a complaint be made in writing subject to the penalties of perjury. If the Enforcement Authority determines that a reported condition may warrant immediate action, or constitutes a substantial violation of this Bylaw, the Enforcement Authority may seek authority to file for injunctive relief in court without first holding a hearing or providing prior notice to the Responsible Party and without requiring the disclosure of the identity of the complainant.

If the Enforcement Authority determines that the condition is subject to the jurisdiction of the Board of Health or is a violation of the State Sanitary Code or any health regulation, in addition to enforcing this Bylaw, he shall refer the matter to the Board of Health for action.

B. Notice to Complainant - In any matter in which a complaint has been made by a person other than the Enforcement Authority, the Enforcement Authority shall notify the complainant in advance of all conferences or proceedings concerning resolution of the complaint or of any enforcement action and the complainant shall be allowed to be present.

C. Removal of Blighted or Unsafe Conditions or Vacant Buildings by Selectmen - If the Responsible Party fails to remedy the conditions upon notice and order from the Enforcement Authority to do so, the Board of Selectmen may cause corrective action for the conditions as provided in General Laws c. 139.

E. Reports by Enforcement Authority - The Enforcement Authority shall file with the Town Manager each month a report that shall include all complaints under this Bylaw made to him during the prior month; all proceedings begun by him under this Bylaw; all pending complaints and all investigations and enforcement actions taken by him or referred to the Board of Health. The report shall state the location of the premises, a summary of the nature of the complaint, the name of the Responsible Party(ies), and the disposition or the status of the matter.

8. OTHER LAWS

Compliance with this Bylaw shall not relieve the Responsible Party of any applicable obligations set forth in any other codes, regulations, covenant conditions or restrictions, and/or homeowner or condominium association rules and regulations.

Approved at Town Meeting (date)

Approved by Attorney General's Office (date)