
Condo Smarts

Headline: What type of alterations need strata permission?

Topic: Alterations

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Dear Tony: Our strata council is trying to be reasonable about renovations in our older building. Several new buyers would like to renovate their units and council is trying to support their requests, but what is the test that is applied to “reasonable” for changes to a unit? Renovations that are limited to new carpets and painting are a quick approval; but renovations that change flooring to hardwood, remove plumbing fixtures, change appliance locations, are much more complicated. Is it reasonable for the strata council to ask for more information or verification of the alteration before we grant approval?

Karen R. Vancouver

Dear Karen: As volunteers, strata councils are asked to perform many complicated tasks from the enforcement of bylaws to evaluation of insurance on liability claims to acting as building evaluators for alterations. The source of resources for any alteration begins with a review of your bylaws and your registered strata plan showing property boundaries. Owners must obtain consent to alter any common/limited property, or part of any strata lot that is part of the structure of the building, or those parts of a strata lot a strata corporation must insure.

Strata corporations must insure the common property, common assets, structure of the building and any fixtures installed by the owner developer. Strictly speaking, this will include even simple items like plumbing fixtures, built in appliances, cabinets and flooring and lighting fixtures. For the most part, fixtures such as replacing carpets, painting, upgrading cabinets and doors, and changing light fixtures rarely requires much scrutiny. These are reasonable upgrades along with decorating.

Where we get into trouble is the casual assumption that an alteration will be “routine” with little impact against

neighbours or the building structure. Alterations that remove or change locations of roofing, walls, windows, changes to electrical, ventilation, sound proofing, plumbing location or upgrades and alterations to fire safety or heating systems, all place a higher level of scrutiny on what is being changed.

Look closely at your bylaws. A strata corporation must be reasonable when an owner requests permission to alter their strata lot, but that doesn’t imply the strata corporation cannot ask for written verification of what is being altered, who is performing the work, how the project will be managed, how demolition/waste will be managed, whether permits are required, and who will pay the costs and assume liability for these alterations.

For example, in wood frame buildings, carpets form a part of the sound suppression and management. Hardwood floors, regardless of the sound proofing installed will increase the sound transmission that could become a major issue for your community. If you are a buyer looking at a renovated condo, make sure the alterations were approved by the strata corporation before you remove subjects. You may be adopting a problem you had not anticipated.