

VANCOUVER BASEMENT FINISHING

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# Basement Suite & Secondary Suite

Legal basement suites, secondary dwelling units,  
fire separation, separate entrances, and municipal  
zoning in Metro Vancouver

12 Expert Answers from Basement IQ

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# Table of Contents

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1. Can I add a legal basement suite in my Vancouver home?
2. What are the BC Building Code requirements for a secondary suite?
3. Does Vancouver allow basement suites in all residential zones?
4. What fire separation is required between a basement suite and the main home?
5. Do I need a separate entrance for a basement suite in Metro Vancouver?
6. What are the minimum room sizes for a legal basement suite in BC?
7. How do I legalize an existing unpermitted basement suite in Vancouver?
8. What rental income can I expect from a basement suite in Metro Vancouver?
9. Do Burnaby and Surrey allow secondary suites?
10. What kitchen requirements apply to a legal basement suite in BC?
11. Can I convert a basement suite in a strata townhome in Metro Vancouver?
12. What parking requirements apply to basement suites in Vancouver?

## Can I add a legal basement suite in my Vancouver home?

Yes, most single-family homes in Vancouver and across Metro Vancouver can add a legal basement suite, but you need to meet BC Building Code requirements, obtain the proper permits, and comply with your municipality's zoning bylaws. The City of Vancouver has been particularly progressive on secondary suites, allowing them in virtually all RS (single-family) zones since 2004, and most Metro Vancouver municipalities now permit them in some form.

Before you start planning, the first step is confirming your home qualifies. Your basement needs a minimum ceiling height of 1.95 metres (6 feet 5 inches) for existing homes under the BC Building Code, though many municipalities require the full 2.1 metres (6 feet 11 inches) for new suite construction. If your ceiling falls short, underpinning is the only solution — and that adds \$30,000 to \$70,000 to the project in Metro Vancouver, including the \$3,000 to \$6,000 structural engineering fee. Measure your ceiling height carefully before committing to a budget.

The BC Building Code mandates several non-negotiable requirements for legal secondary suites. You need 1-hour fire-rated separation between the suite and the main dwelling, which means Type X drywall on ceilings and shared walls, fire-rated doors with self-closers, and interconnected smoke and carbon monoxide detectors throughout both units. Every bedroom must have an egress window with a minimum unobstructed opening of 0.35 square metres, minimum width of 380mm, and a sill no higher than 1,100mm from the floor. The suite needs its own kitchen, bathroom, sleeping area, and living space, plus a separate entrance or a shared entrance with direct access to both units.

In Metro Vancouver, the total cost of a complete secondary suite conversion typically runs \$60,000 to \$120,000 or more, depending on whether underpinning is needed, the scope of plumbing and electrical work, and the quality of finishes. That investment makes strong financial sense in Vancouver's rental market — a legal one-bedroom basement suite can generate \$1,500 to \$2,500 per month in rent depending on the neighbourhood and finishes, which means the project can pay for itself within three to five years.

You will need a building permit from your local municipality, plus separate electrical and plumbing permits. Electrical work must be done by a licensed contractor and inspected by Technical Safety BC. Your contractor must carry WorkSafeBC coverage. Skipping permits is a serious mistake — unpermitted suites create insurance complications, can result in fines and forced removal orders, and cause major problems at resale when a buyer's home inspector flags the work.

If you are considering this project, start with a consultation with your municipal building department to confirm zoning compliance, then get two or three quotes from experienced basement contractors. Vancouver Basement Finishing can match you with local professionals who specialize in secondary suite conversions through the Vancouver Construction Network.

## What are the BC Building Code requirements for a secondary suite?

The BC Building Code sets strict requirements for secondary suites covering ceiling height, fire separation, egress, ventilation, plumbing, electrical, and structural integrity — and every one of these must be met before your municipality will issue occupancy approval. These are life-safety requirements, not suggestions, and cutting corners creates real danger for tenants and serious liability for homeowners.

The most critical requirement is fire separation. The BC Building Code requires a 1-hour fire-rated separation between the secondary suite and the main dwelling. In practice, this means installing 5/8-inch Type X drywall on ceilings and all shared walls between the two units. Fire-rated doors with self-closing hardware are required at every opening between units. Interconnected smoke detectors must be installed on every level, outside sleeping areas, and inside every bedroom — when one alarm triggers, they all sound. Carbon monoxide detectors are also mandatory on every level. This fire separation work typically costs \$3,000 to \$8,000 in Metro Vancouver depending on the size of the shared surfaces.

Ceiling height is the requirement that stops many projects before they start. For secondary suites in existing homes, the BC Building Code requires a minimum of 1.95 metres (6 feet 5 inches), measured to the lowest obstruction including beams, bulkheads, and ductwork. New construction suites require 2.1 metres (6 feet 11 inches). Many post-war homes across Burnaby, New Westminster, and North Vancouver have basements in the 6-foot-6-inch to 7-foot range — just barely meeting the minimum. If your ceiling falls below the threshold, underpinning at \$30,000 to \$70,000 is the only code-compliant solution.

Every bedroom in the suite requires an egress window with a minimum unobstructed opening of 0.35 square metres, a minimum width of 380mm, and a maximum sill height of 1,100mm from the finished floor. In Metro Vancouver's rainy climate, window wells must include proper drainage — a gravel bed connected to the perimeter drainage system — to prevent water pooling. Each egress window installation costs approximately \$3,000 to \$8,000 including the structural opening, lintel, window, and window well.

The suite must have its own bathroom with exhaust ventilation — minimum 50 CFM vented to the exterior, not just recirculating. A full kitchen is required with cooking facilities, a sink, and adequate counter space. The suite needs its own heating system or a dedicated zone from the main system, and electrical service must be adequate for both units — many older Vancouver homes need a panel upgrade from 100 to 200 amps at a cost of \$2,500 to \$5,000.

All electrical work must be performed by a licensed electrical contractor and inspected by Technical Safety BC. Plumbing work requires a licensed plumber and municipal inspection. Your contractor must carry WorkSafeBC coverage. BC's seismic requirements also apply — any structural modifications, including foundation openings for egress windows and underpinning, must be engineered for the province's seismic zone. This is a cost and complexity factor that does not exist in most other Canadian

provinces.

Getting all of these elements right requires an experienced contractor who understands BC Building Code requirements for suites. Need help finding one? Vancouver Basement Finishing can connect you with qualified local professionals for free.

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## Does Vancouver allow basement suites in all residential zones?

The City of Vancouver permits secondary suites in virtually all single-family residential (RS) zones, making it one of the most suite-friendly municipalities in British Columbia. Vancouver has allowed secondary suites broadly since 2004, and the city has continued to expand and simplify the regulations over the years to address the housing affordability crisis.

Under Vancouver's current zoning, if you own a single-family home on an RS-zoned lot, you are generally allowed one secondary suite. In many zones, you may also be permitted a laneway house in addition to the basement suite, giving you the potential for three dwelling units on a single lot. However, the specific permissions depend on your exact zoning designation — RS-1, RS-3, RS-5, and other variants have slightly different rules around lot coverage, parking, and the number of units permitted. Always check your property's zoning with the City of Vancouver's planning department or their online zoning map before committing to a project.

Outside the City of Vancouver, the rules vary by municipality. Burnaby allows secondary suites in all single-family zones and has been actively encouraging them. Surrey permits secondary suites in most single-family zones with some restrictions in agricultural and rural areas. Coquitlam, Port Coquitlam, and Port Moody — the Tri-Cities — all allow suites in most residential zones. North Vancouver (both the City and the District) permits suites broadly. Richmond allows secondary suites in most single-family zones, though the city's high water table and prevalence of slab-on-grade construction make full basement suites less common than in other Metro Vancouver municipalities. New Westminister, Delta, Langley, White Rock, Maple Ridge, and Pitt Meadows all have secondary suite provisions, though the specific zoning requirements differ.

Even where suites are permitted by zoning, your specific property must still meet all BC Building Code requirements — minimum ceiling height of 1.95 metres for existing homes, 1-hour fire-rated separation, egress windows in every bedroom, separate entrance or shared entrance with direct access, full kitchen and bathroom, and adequate parking. Some municipalities require an additional parking space for the suite, which can be a challenge on narrow Vancouver lots.

There are a few situations where basement suites face restrictions. Strata townhomes generally cannot add secondary suites because the strata corporation's bylaws and the building's fire separation design do not allow it. Properties in heritage conservation areas may face additional design review. Homes in flood plain areas — common in Richmond and parts of Delta — may have restrictions on below-grade habitable space.

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best first step is to contact your municipal planning department or check their website for secondary suite regulations specific to your property. Once you confirm zoning compliance, a qualified basement contractor can assess whether your basement meets the physical requirements. Vancouver Basement Finishing can match you with experienced suite conversion contractors through the Vancouver Construction Network at no cost.</p>

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## What fire separation is required between a basement suite and the main home?

The BC Building Code requires a 1-hour fire-rated separation between a secondary suite and the main dwelling, including all shared walls, the ceiling assembly between units, and fire-rated doors at every opening between the two spaces. This is the single most important safety requirement for basement suites, and it is the area where inspectors are most rigorous during the permitting process.

In practical terms, achieving 1-hour fire separation means installing 5/8-inch Type X drywall on all ceilings in the basement suite where the main floor is directly above, and on all shared walls between the suite and the main home. Type X drywall contains glass fibres that hold the gypsum core together longer during a fire, giving occupants approximately 60 minutes to escape before structural failure. Standard 1/2-inch drywall does not meet this requirement — it provides roughly 30 minutes of fire resistance at best. For the ceiling assembly, most contractors install a double layer of 5/8-inch Type X drywall to ensure compliance, particularly where joists are spaced at 16 inches on centre.

Fire-rated doors are required at every opening between the suite and the main dwelling. These are solid-core doors with a 20-minute fire rating, and they must be equipped with self-closing hardware — spring hinges or a door closer — so they shut automatically if left open during a fire. The door frames must also meet fire-rating requirements. If the suite has a shared entrance or common hallway with the main home, the fire separation must extend through that space as well.

One detail that catches many homeowners off guard is penetrations through the fire-rated assembly. Every hole cut for electrical boxes, plumbing pipes, HVAC ducts, or any other service that passes through a fire-rated wall or ceiling must be sealed with fire-rated caulking or intumescent putty pads. A single unsealed electrical box can compromise the entire fire separation. Recessed pot lights in a fire-rated ceiling are particularly problematic — they require fire-rated housings (IC-rated is not sufficient; you need fire-rated enclosures) or must be surface-mounted instead.

Interconnected smoke detectors are mandatory on every level of both the main dwelling and the suite, outside all sleeping areas, and inside every bedroom. When one detector triggers, every unit in the alarm system must sound. Carbon monoxide detectors are also required on every level. These detectors must be hardwired with battery backup — battery-only units do not meet the BC Building Code requirement for new installations.

The cost of fire separation work in a Metro Vancouver basement suite project typically runs \$3,000 to \$8,000, covering the Type X drywall, taping and finishing, fire-rated doors with self-closers, penetration sealing, and interconnected alarm system. While it is a significant expense, it is non-negotiable from both a code compliance and life-safety perspective. Municipal inspectors will examine every aspect of the fire separation before granting occupancy, and insurance companies may deny claims if fire separation is found to be deficient.

This is not DIY territory. Hire a contractor experienced in secondary suite conversions who understands the fire-rating requirements inside and out. Vancouver Basement Finishing can connect you with qualified professionals for free through the Vancouver

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## Do I need a separate entrance for a basement suite in Metro Vancouver?

The BC Building Code does not strictly require a completely separate exterior entrance for a secondary suite, but it does require that each unit has its own means of egress — and most Metro Vancouver municipalities strongly prefer or effectively require a separate entrance for practical and safety reasons. The specific requirements vary by municipality, so checking your local bylaws is essential before designing your suite layout.

Under the BC Building Code, the minimum requirement is that occupants of the secondary suite can exit the building without passing through the main dwelling. This can be achieved through a shared entrance with a common vestibule or hallway that provides direct access to both the main unit and the suite, as long as the fire separation requirements are maintained throughout the shared space. However, most municipalities in Metro Vancouver — including the City of Vancouver, Burnaby, and Surrey — require or strongly recommend a dedicated separate entrance for the suite, and this is what most contractors build.

A separate entrance for a basement suite in Metro Vancouver typically costs \$8,000 to \$20,000 depending on the complexity. The simplest scenario is a home with an existing side door or rear door at grade level that can be converted into the suite entrance with minimal structural work. Vancouver Specials and homes with walk-out basements often already have a rear entrance at basement level, making suite conversion significantly easier and less expensive.

When a separate entrance does not already exist, the work involves cutting a new doorway through the foundation wall, installing a structural lintel above the opening, adding stairs or a landing if needed, and building weather protection. In Metro Vancouver's marine climate, the entrance design must account for the region's heavy rainfall — a covered landing or porch, proper drainage away from the door, and waterproof membrane detailing around the foundation opening are all essential. Water intrusion at a poorly detailed basement entrance is one of the most common problems in Metro Vancouver suites.

For homes on sloped lots — common across North Vancouver, West Vancouver, Burnaby Mountain, and the Tri-Cities — the natural grade change often allows for a walk-out or garden-level entrance without significant excavation. On flat lots in areas like Richmond, Delta, and South Vancouver, creating a separate entrance may require excavating a stairwell down to the basement level with a window well-style retaining wall, proper drainage, and a cover or awning. These below-grade entrance stairwells need a floor drain connected to the perimeter drainage system to handle rainwater — without it, the stairwell will flood during Vancouver's fall and winter rainstorms.

The entrance must also meet BC Building Code requirements for means of egress, including minimum door width of 810mm, adequate headroom on stairs, proper lighting, and non-

slip surfaces on exterior steps. If the entrance involves stairs, handrails are required. The landing at the bottom of an exterior stairwell must be large enough to open the door without standing on the stairs.

Beyond code requirements, a well-designed separate entrance adds significant value to the suite. Tenants prefer the privacy and independence of their own entrance, which helps justify higher rents — and in Metro Vancouver's competitive rental market, that distinction matters. Get matched with a basement contractor experienced in suite entrances through Vancouver Basement Finishing at no cost.

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## What are the minimum room sizes for a legal basement suite in BC?

The BC Building Code sets specific minimum room sizes for secondary suites, covering bedrooms, living areas, kitchens, and bathrooms — and these minimums are strictly enforced during the permitting and inspection process.

Understanding these dimensions before you start planning your layout will save you from costly redesigns mid-project.

For bedrooms, the BC Building Code requires a minimum floor area of 7.0 square metres (approximately 75 square feet) for a single-occupancy bedroom. A bedroom intended for two occupants must be at least 9.8 square metres (approximately 105 square feet). These measurements are for usable floor area — closets, alcoves under 1.4 metres in ceiling height, and areas obstructed by mechanical equipment do not count toward the minimum. Every bedroom must also have an egress window meeting BC Building Code requirements: minimum 0.35 square metres of unobstructed opening, minimum 380mm width, and a sill no higher than 1,100mm from the finished floor.

The living room or combined living-dining area must be large enough to function as a habitable space. While the BC Building Code does not prescribe an exact minimum square footage for living areas in secondary suites, most municipalities expect a combined living space of at least 11 to 14 square metres (120 to 150 square feet) to be considered functional. The room must have adequate natural light and ventilation — windows providing a glazed area of at least 5% of the floor area served, and openable area of at least 0.5% of the floor area for ventilation.

The kitchen must include cooking facilities (stove or cooktop with oven), a sink with hot and cold water, adequate counter space for food preparation, and storage. There is no strict minimum square footage for the kitchen alone, but it must be functional and meet electrical code requirements for dedicated circuits — typically a minimum of two 20-amp small appliance circuits, a dedicated circuit for the refrigerator, and a dedicated circuit for the range. In a small basement suite, many homeowners opt for a galley or L-shaped kitchen to maximize space efficiency. Kitchen and kitchenette installations in Metro Vancouver basement suites typically cost \$8,000 to \$20,000 including cabinetry, countertops, appliances, plumbing, and electrical.

The bathroom must include a toilet, sink, and either a bathtub or shower. A three-piece bathroom

(toilet, sink, shower) is the minimum for most suites. The bathroom needs an **exhaust fan vented to the exterior** at a minimum of 50 CFM — recirculating fans do not meet code. In Metro Vancouver's humid climate, proper bathroom ventilation is even more critical than the code minimum suggests. Basement bathroom costs in Metro Vancouver run **\$15,000 to \$35,000** depending on whether a rough-in exists and the quality of finishes.

**Ceiling height** throughout the suite must be a minimum of **1.95 metres (6 feet 5 inches)** in existing homes, measured to the lowest obstruction. This includes areas under beams, bulkheads housing ductwork, and any structural elements that project below the ceiling plane. Many older homes across Vancouver, Burnaby, and New Westminster have HVAC ductwork and drain pipes that create bulkheads dropping below the minimum — these must be rerouted, raised, or the floor lowered beneath them to achieve compliance.

The total **minimum suite size** that most Metro Vancouver municipalities will approve is typically around **30 to 37 square metres (320 to 400 square feet)** including bedroom, living area, kitchen, and bathroom. Anything smaller becomes very difficult to lay out in a way that meets all the individual room minimums while maintaining hallway widths and functional flow. A more comfortable and rentable suite is usually **46 to 65 square metres (500 to 700 square feet)**.

Planning a suite layout that meets all these minimums while working around foundation walls, columns, mechanical systems, and existing plumbing is genuinely challenging. An experienced basement contractor can assess your space and create a compliant layout. Vancouver Basement Finishing can match you with suite specialists at no cost.

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## How do I legalize an existing unpermitted basement suite in Vancouver?

Legalizing an existing unpermitted basement suite in Vancouver requires applying for a building permit, bringing the suite up to current BC Building Code standards, and passing all required inspections — and the process can be straightforward or extremely expensive depending on how far the original work deviates from code. Many Metro Vancouver homes have unpermitted suites built in the 1990s and 2000s when enforcement was less rigorous, and bringing them into compliance is increasingly important for insurance, liability, and resale purposes.

The first step is to contact your municipal building department — in the City of Vancouver, that is the Development and Building Services Centre — and explain that you want to legalize an existing suite. Most municipalities have a process for this, and many have been actively encouraging homeowners to come forward rather than penalizing them. The City of Vancouver has historically taken a supportive approach to legalization, though you are still required to meet current code standards.

The building department will typically require you to submit floor plans and drawings showing the existing suite layout, and a building inspector will visit to assess what work has been done and what needs to be upgraded. Common deficiencies in unpermitted Metro Vancouver suites include inadequate fire separation (no Type X drywall, missing fire-rated doors, unsealed penetrations), missing or undersized egress windows, insufficient ceiling height, lack of interconnected smoke and CO detectors, unpermitted electrical work (no inspection by Technical Safety BC), and missing or improperly installed plumbing ventilation.

The cost of legalization varies enormously. If the original suite was built reasonably well and only needs fire separation upgrades, smoke detectors, and minor electrical corrections, you might spend \$10,000 to \$25,000. If the suite has fundamental problems — ceiling height below 1.95 metres, no egress windows, unpermitted electrical throughout, or no fire separation at all — the cost can escalate to \$40,000 to \$80,000 or more, essentially the cost of rebuilding the suite from scratch. In the worst cases, some of the existing finishing must be demolished and rebuilt so that inspectors can verify the work behind the walls — you cannot simply drywall over unknown electrical wiring and call it compliant.

Electrical work is typically the most problematic area in unpermitted suites. Wiring done without permits may not meet code for wire gauge, circuit loading, GFCI protection in wet areas, or panel capacity. All electrical work must be inspected by Technical Safety BC, and an inspector may require opening walls to verify wiring behind finished surfaces. If the original wiring is aluminum (common in 1960s-1970s Metro Vancouver homes), it may need to be replaced entirely. A panel upgrade from 100 to 200 amps — often necessary when adding a suite — costs \$2,500 to \$5,000 in Metro Vancouver.

Plumbing is another common issue. Unpermitted bathroom and kitchen installations may have incorrect drain sizing, missing venting, or improper connections that create sewer gas risks. A licensed plumber must verify and correct all plumbing, and the work must pass municipal inspection.

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important consideration: **insurance implications**. Many home insurance policies exclude coverage for losses originating in unpermitted spaces. If a fire starts in an unpermitted suite, your insurer may deny the claim entirely. If a tenant is injured due to deficient life-safety systems in an unpermitted suite, the homeowner faces serious personal liability. Legalizing the suite resolves these risks and typically results in better insurance rates once the suite is properly permitted.

Start by booking an assessment with an experienced basement contractor who can evaluate the existing suite against current code requirements and provide a realistic cost estimate. Vancouver Basement Finishing can connect you with contractors who specialize in suite legalization projects through the Vancouver Construction Network.

Q8

## What rental income can I expect from a basement suite in Metro Vancouver?

**A legal basement suite in Metro Vancouver can generate \$1,200 to \$2,800 per month in rental income depending on the neighbourhood, suite size, number of bedrooms, quality of finishes, and whether it includes a separate entrance and in-suite laundry.** Metro Vancouver's rental vacancy rate has remained extremely low — typically under 2% — which means well-finished basement suites attract tenants quickly and command strong rents.

Here is what to expect by area and configuration in the current Metro Vancouver market. A **one-bedroom suite in East Vancouver or Burnaby** with basic finishes rents for approximately **\$1,400 to \$1,800 per month**. The same suite in **Kitsilano, Mount Pleasant, or the North Shore** commands **\$1,800 to \$2,400** due to location premiums. A **two-bedroom suite in Surrey, Delta, or Langley** typically rents for **\$1,500 to \$2,000**, while a two-bedroom in **Vancouver proper or Burnaby** can fetch **\$2,000 to \$2,800**. Suites with **separate entrances, in-suite laundry, modern finishes, and good natural light** consistently command the top of these ranges.

The **return on investment** for a basement suite is one of the strongest home improvement investments you can make in Metro Vancouver. A typical secondary suite conversion costs **\$60,000 to \$120,000** depending on scope. At a conservative rent of \$1,800 per month — \$21,600 annually — a \$90,000 suite investment pays for itself in roughly **four to five years**. That does not account for the increase in your property's resale value, which typically rises by 60% to 80% of the suite conversion cost in Metro Vancouver's market. A home with a legal, permitted suite is significantly more attractive to buyers than one without.

Several factors significantly affect your rental income potential. **Suite size** matters — a 600-square-foot one-bedroom with an open-concept layout rents better than a cramped 350-square-foot bachelor. **Ceiling height** affects perceived spaciousness; suites with 8-foot ceilings feel dramatically different from those with the bare minimum 6-foot-5-inch clearance. **Natural light** is perhaps the single biggest factor in tenant satisfaction — investing in

larger egress windows, light wells, and strategic use of mirrors and light-coloured finishes pays dividends in both rent and tenant retention.

**Quality of finishes** directly correlates with rental rates. Luxury vinyl plank flooring at **\$4 to \$9 per square foot installed** gives a modern, clean look that photographs well for listings. A well-finished kitchen with quality cabinetry and quartz countertops adds \$3,000 to \$5,000 over builder-grade options but justifies an extra \$100 to \$200 per month in rent. A modern bathroom with porcelain tile and a glass shower enclosure makes a similar impression.

**In-suite laundry** is increasingly expected by tenants in Metro Vancouver and can add **\$75 to \$150 per month** to your rental rate. A compact stacked washer-dryer costs approximately **\$1,500 to \$3,000** for the appliances plus \$500 to \$1,500 for plumbing and electrical hookup — an investment that pays for itself within two years through higher rent.

Keep in mind the **ongoing costs** of being a landlord: property insurance increases slightly with a suite (typically \$200 to \$500 per year), utilities shared or included in rent, maintenance and repairs, and potential vacancy between tenants. BC's Residential Tenancy Act governs the landlord-tenant relationship, including rules on rent increases, security deposits, and notice periods. The annual allowable rent increase is set by the province each year.

The key to maximizing rental income is building a suite that tenants want to live in long-term — good light, comfortable ceiling height, modern finishes, proper ventilation and heating, and a separate entrance. Vancouver Basement Finishing can help you find a contractor to build a suite that commands top-of-market rents. Get matched for free through the Vancouver Construction Network.

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Q9

## Do Burnaby and Surrey allow secondary suites?

**Yes, both Burnaby and Surrey allow secondary suites in most single-family residential zones, and both municipalities have been actively encouraging suite creation to address Metro Vancouver's housing shortage.** The specific rules differ between the two cities, so understanding each municipality's requirements is important before you start planning.

**Burnaby** permits secondary suites in all R-zoned (single-family residential) properties. The city updated its zoning bylaws to broadly allow suites and has streamlined the permitting process. Burnaby requires that the suite be contained within the principal dwelling (no detached suites), that the property owner lives in one of the units, and that the suite meets all BC Building Code requirements including 1-hour fire separation, egress windows, interconnected smoke and CO detectors, and minimum ceiling height of 1.95 metres in existing homes. Burnaby generally requires **one additional off-street parking space** for the suite, which can be a challenge on narrower lots in established neighbourhoods like Burnaby Heights, Capitol Hill, and the Edmonds area.

Burnaby's housing stock is well-suited to secondary suites. Many homes in **South Burnaby, Metrotown, and Deer Lake** are 1960s

to 1980s construction with poured concrete foundations and basement ceiling heights of 7 to 8 feet — adequate for finishing without underpinning. The city's post-war bungalows and split-levels in **North Burnaby and Burnaby Heights** often have lower ceilings in the 6-foot-6-inch to 7-foot range, which may require underpinning at **\$30,000 to \$70,000** to achieve comfortable headroom for a rental suite. Newer homes in areas like **UniverCity and Brentwood** may already have roughed-in plumbing for future suites.

**Surrey** allows secondary suites in most single-family residential zones, including the RA (acreage), RF (single-family), and RH (half-acre) zones. Surrey has been one of the most progressive municipalities in Metro Vancouver on housing density, and the city actively processes suite applications. Like Burnaby, Surrey requires the homeowner to reside in one of the units. One off-street parking space is typically required for the suite in addition to the standard requirement for the main dwelling.

Surrey's geographic diversity means basement conditions vary significantly across the city. **South Surrey and White Rock** have a mix of 1970s to 1990s homes on larger lots with good basement ceiling heights — prime candidates for suite conversion. **Newton and Whalley** have a range of housing ages with varying basement conditions. **Cloverdale and Fleetwood** feature many 1980s and 1990s suburban homes with 7-to-8-foot basements well-suited for finishing. **North Surrey** near the SkyTrain corridor has seen significant redevelopment, and many newer homes are designed with suite-ready basements.

Both municipalities require full **building permits** for secondary suite construction, plus separate electrical permits (inspected by **Technical Safety BC**) and plumbing permits (inspected by municipal plumbing inspectors). All contractors must carry **WorkSafeBC** coverage. The permitting timeline in both cities is typically **4 to 8 weeks** for plan review, though this varies with application volume and project complexity.

The total cost for a secondary suite in either city follows Metro Vancouver averages: **\$60,000 to \$120,000** for a complete conversion, depending on whether underpinning, egress windows, or significant plumbing work is needed. Rental income potential is strong in both cities — a one-bedroom suite near SkyTrain in Burnaby can command **\$1,600 to \$2,200 per month**, while a two-bedroom suite in Surrey typically rents for **\$1,500 to \$2,000**.

Before starting, contact your city's building department — Burnaby's Planning and Building Department or Surrey's Planning and Development Division — to confirm your property's zoning and any site-specific requirements. Then get quotes from experienced suite contractors. Vancouver Basement Finishing can match you with qualified professionals at no cost.

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## What kitchen requirements apply to a legal basement suite in BC?

A legal secondary suite in British Columbia must have a fully functional kitchen with cooking facilities, a sink with hot and cold water, adequate counter space, storage, and the electrical circuits to safely power all appliances — and the kitchen must comply with BC Building Code, electrical code, and plumbing code requirements. The kitchen is one of the defining features that distinguishes a legal suite from a mere finished basement, and inspectors pay close attention to it.

The cooking facilities must include either a full-size range (stove with oven) or a cooktop with a separate oven. A microwave alone does not satisfy the cooking requirement. The range or cooktop needs a dedicated electrical circuit — a standard electric range requires a 40-amp or 50-amp 240-volt circuit with the appropriate receptacle. If you are installing a gas range, which is common in Metro Vancouver homes with natural gas service, you need a dedicated gas line installed by a licensed gas fitter and inspected by Technical Safety BC. A range hood or exhaust fan vented to the exterior is required to manage cooking fumes and moisture — recirculating range hoods are generally acceptable under BC Building Code, but exterior venting is strongly recommended in Vancouver's humid climate.

The electrical requirements for a suite kitchen are substantial and must be done by a licensed electrical contractor. At minimum, you need two 20-amp small appliance circuits serving the countertop receptacles, a dedicated circuit for the refrigerator, a dedicated circuit for the range, and a dedicated circuit for the dishwasher if one is installed. All countertop receptacles within 1.5 metres of the sink must be GFCI-protected. Receptacles must be spaced so that no point along the countertop is more than 900mm from an outlet. For a basement suite kitchen, all of this electrical work must be inspected and approved by Technical Safety BC before the walls are closed up.

The plumbing requires a kitchen sink with hot and cold water supply and a drain connected to the home's waste system. The drain must be properly vented to prevent sewer gas from entering the suite — an AAV (air admittance valve) may be acceptable in some situations, but a traditional vent through the roof is preferred. If the kitchen drain is below the level of the sewer connection, a sewage ejector pump may be needed, adding \$2,000 to \$4,000 to the project. A dishwasher connection requires its own drain and an air gap or high-loop to prevent backflow.

Counter space and storage must be sufficient for food preparation. While the BC Building Code does not specify exact counter dimensions for secondary suites, municipal inspectors expect a functional kitchen layout. Most successful suite kitchens in Metro Vancouver use either a galley layout (counters on two opposing walls) or an L-shaped configuration to maximize efficiency in the typically compact space. A minimum of 1.5 to 2.0 metres of counter length with at least 600mm of depth is a practical target, though more is better for tenant satisfaction and rental value.

The kitchen must also have adequate lighting — general ceiling lighting plus task lighting over work surfaces. Under-cabinet LED lighting is an inexpensive addition that dramatically improves

the functionality of a small suite kitchen. The kitchen area needs **smoke detection** — a smoke detector must be located near but not inside the kitchen to avoid nuisance alarms from cooking.

In terms of costs, a **complete suite kitchen installation** in Metro Vancouver typically runs **\$8,000 to \$20,000**. On the lower end, that covers basic flat-panel cabinetry, laminate countertops, a standard range, refrigerator, basic plumbing, and the required electrical circuits. At the higher end, you get shaker-style cabinetry, quartz countertops, a dishwasher, higher-end appliances, and premium fixtures. Spending more on the kitchen is one of the best investments in a suite — it directly affects rental rates and tenant retention.

For a compact kitchen that meets all code requirements and appeals to tenants, work with a contractor experienced in Metro Vancouver suite conversions. Vancouver Basement Finishing can match you with qualified professionals through the Vancouver Construction Network at no cost.

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Q11

## Can I convert a basement suite in a strata townhome in Metro Vancouver?

**Converting a basement into a rental suite in a strata townhome in Metro Vancouver is technically possible but faces significant legal, structural, and strata governance hurdles that make it far more complicated than a suite conversion in a detached home.** In most cases, the strata bylaws will either prohibit rental suites entirely or require a 3/4 vote of all strata owners to approve the conversion, and even with strata approval, you still need to meet all BC Building Code requirements and obtain municipal permits.

The first barrier is your **strata corporation's bylaws**. Most strata plans in Metro Vancouver include bylaws that restrict or prohibit the creation of secondary suites within individual units. Even if your strata does not have an explicit prohibition, the BC Strata Property Act gives strata corporations significant authority over alterations that affect common property, common infrastructure, or the building envelope. A basement suite conversion involves plumbing, electrical, HVAC modifications, and potentially structural changes — all of which are likely to require strata council approval and possibly a special resolution (3/4 vote) at a general meeting. Review your strata plan and bylaws carefully, and consult with the strata management company before spending money on design or permit applications.

**Fire separation is the most critical building code issue in a strata townhome.** The BC Building Code already requires fire-rated separation between attached townhome units, and adding a secondary suite introduces additional fire separation requirements between the suite and the rest of your unit. Any work that affects the demising walls (the walls between your unit and the neighbouring units) is almost certainly considered common property under the Strata Property Act, meaning you cannot modify it without strata approval. Maintaining and

potentially upgrading fire separation adds complexity and cost — expect \$5,000 to \$15,000 for fire separation work alone in a strata context.

A major structural consideration in many newer Metro Vancouver strata townhomes is post-tensioned concrete slabs. These slabs contain steel cables under high tension that cannot be cut without risking catastrophic structural failure. If your townhome has a post-tensioned slab — common in developments built after 2000 — you cannot cut the floor to install conventional plumbing drains for a bathroom or kitchen. Your options are limited to up-flush or macerating toilet systems and above-slab drain routing, which adds \$3,000 to \$6,000 over conventional plumbing and limits your layout flexibility. A structural engineer must confirm whether your slab is post-tensioned before any planning begins — this assessment costs \$500 to \$1,000.

Zoning is another layer to navigate. Your municipality must allow secondary suites in the zone where your strata complex is located. The City of Vancouver, Burnaby, Surrey, and most Metro Vancouver municipalities do permit secondary suites in many residential zones, but strata townhome developments may fall under different zoning categories than detached homes. Check with your municipal planning department to confirm that your specific property is eligible for a suite before approaching your strata council.

Even with all approvals in place, insurance and liability require careful attention. Your strata corporation's insurance policy may not cover modifications related to suite conversions, and you will likely need to update your own unit insurance to reflect the rental use. Notify your insurance provider before beginning work — discovering a coverage gap after a water leak or fire in the suite can be financially devastating. The practical reality is that most strata townhome owners in Metro Vancouver who want to finish their basements do so as personal living space — a recreation room, home office, or extra bedroom — rather than as a rental suite, because the strata approval process for a full suite conversion is lengthy and uncertain. If you are considering this route, start by consulting your strata management company and a contractor experienced with strata renovations through the Vancouver Construction Network.

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### What parking requirements apply to basement suites in Vancouver?

In the City of Vancouver, the parking requirement for a property with a secondary suite is one off-street parking space for the principal dwelling — and as of recent bylaw changes, the city no longer requires a dedicated additional parking space specifically for the suite in most zones. This is a significant shift that has made suite conversions more accessible, particularly on narrow Vancouver lots where adding an extra parking space was physically impossible or prohibitively expensive.

However, parking requirements vary across Metro Vancouver municipalities, and what applies in the City of Vancouver does not necessarily apply in Burnaby, Surrey, Coquitlam, or other cities. Burnaby generally requires one additional off-street parking space for a secondary suite beyond the two spaces required for the main dwelling. Surrey similarly requires additional parking for a suite, though the specific number depends on the zoning district — typically one additional space. Coquitlam, Port Coquitlam, and Port Moody each have their own parking bylaws that you must check before applying for a suite permit. The Township of Langley and City of Langley also have distinct requirements. Always verify the specific parking bylaw for your municipality before committing to a suite conversion — the permit will not be approved if you cannot demonstrate compliance with parking requirements.

In practice, tandem parking — where one vehicle parks behind another in a single driveway — is accepted by most Metro Vancouver municipalities as meeting the additional parking requirement. A standard single-width driveway that is at least 5.5 metres (18 feet) long can accommodate two vehicles in tandem. If your driveway is shorter or your property relies on street parking only, you may face challenges meeting the parking requirement in municipalities that still enforce it. Some homeowners have addressed this by widening their driveway or converting a portion of the front yard to a parking pad, though this requires its own permit and must comply with lot coverage and landscaping bylaws.

Garage conversions create a common conflict with parking requirements. If your property's required parking space is in a garage and you want to convert that garage space to living area or a suite entrance, you need to provide a replacement off-street parking space elsewhere on the lot. This catches homeowners off guard — particularly with Vancouver Specials where the ground-level garage is an attractive candidate for suite space. If the garage provides required parking under the zoning bylaw, removing it without providing a replacement space will result in a permit denial.

For strata townhomes, parking is typically defined in the strata plan, with each unit assigned specific parking stalls. Adding a suite does not automatically entitle you to an additional parking stall, and the strata corporation controls parking allocation on common property. This is one more reason why strata suite conversions are more complex than detached home conversions in Metro Vancouver.

The cost implications of parking requirements are generally modest for properties that already have adequate driveway space — essentially zero additional cost. If you need to create or modify a parking area, budget \$3,000 to \$8,000 for a new concrete or asphalt parking pad including any required grading and drainage work. The real cost risk is discovering parking non-compliance after you have already invested in permit applications and design — check parking requirements first, before any other planning. Vancouver Basement Finishing can connect you with contractors who handle the full suite conversion process including municipal compliance through the Vancouver Construction Network.

**Disclaimer:** This guide is provided for informational purposes only by Vancouver Basement Finishing. It does not constitute professional advice. Always consult qualified, licensed contractors and your local building authority before starting any basement finishing project. Information is current as of March 15, 2026 and may change. Visit [vancouverbasementfinishing.com](https://vancouverbasementfinishing.com) for the latest answers.