



## **Condos and Wood Burning Fireplaces**

By Denise Lash on December 13, 2010



Wood Burning Fireplaces in homes can often lead to high risk situations if not properly maintained and repaired. Many fires have been caused by problems with the corrosion of chimneys, all because the owner was not aware of the hazards.

In high-rise and town home condominiums, the maintenance and repair of fireplaces and chimneys may be the joint responsibility of both the unit owner and the condominium corporation. It may only take one fireplace failure to cause a major fire in an entire complex with severe consequences.

In the late 80's and early 90's some condominium developers installed wood burning fireplaces in condominium projects and many are still around today.

We have advised condominium corporations on the risks associated with wood burning fireplaces in condominiums, especially in instances where the fireplaces have deteriorated to such a degree that they become unsafe. Our recommendation based on our consultations with fire department officials, is that the fireplaces either they be totally removed or the chimneys sealed off.

This follows our many discussions with the Chief Fire Prevention Officer of the City of Burlington, Dave Cioruch, who has had experience with various Fire Code Violations concerning the installation and maintenance of chimneys associated with wood burning fireplaces.

In most cases, the removal, repair or access to conduct the inspection could not even be carried out because most chimneys run vertically through other residents suites and therefore the only suitable option to permanently seal off the chimneys to prevent use. Continuing to use the fireplaces is often not an option as it was clear that the defects in the chimney creates a hazardous condition.

One of the duties of the board of directors of a condominium corporation is to take steps to ensure that the residents and the condominium property are protected if the board is aware that a hazard exists.

These steps will often cause those owners who have had the use of those fireplaces to dispute the board's decision to interfere with their use of something that they thought they had purchased and had the right to use. The board in balancing the interests of all the unit owners, will often look at the various options available to the condominium corporation.



This may include replacing, removing or repairing the fireplaces and chimneys. Before a decision is made the board should ask the following questions:

1. Can the repairs be carried out?
2. If repairs can be carried out, can the repairs be carried out in a cost effective manner?
3. If the repairs are carried out, is there still a potential risk in the future?
4. What alternatives are available if the fireplaces are removed ie. Gas or Electric fireplaces
5. Are the alternatives cost effective?

In our experience, the solution is usually to have wood burning fireplaces removed and replaced with electric fireplaces. Though not ideal for those unit owners who love the "roar of the hearth", the actions taken by the board to create a safe environment will benefit them in the long run and remove the potential for a serious incident in the future.

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