

Construction Codes Advisory

Promoting construction of safe, healthy, habitable buildings

Shipping Containers

Question

Are shipping containers (sea cans) subject to the building code?

Answer

Yes, but only when a shipping container is no longer used for its original purpose, which is the shipping and storage of freight. When it is placed on a property for use in the support or shelter of any use or *occupancy*, the structure is considered a *building*.

The shipping containers are required to comply with provisions of *The Construction Codes Act* (the CC Act), *The Building Code Regulations*, *The Energy Code Regulations*, *The Fire Safety Act* and their associated regulations, the National Building Code of Canada (NBC), the National Energy Code of Canada for Buildings, the National Fire Code of Canada (NFC) and municipal bylaws. The following may also be required:

- Development permit
- Building permit
- Construction plans

Background

Intermodal shipping containers or “sea cans” are used for the transport of goods from one place to another. These containers are designed to be packed with goods and lifted, stacked, handled and moved by one mode of transportation or another. However, their availability, capacity and

strength make them desirable for many other uses. Location for use will subject them to a number of requirements applicable to the construction and fire safe operation of *buildings*.

A *building* as defined by the CC Act means any structure used or intended for supporting or sheltering any use or *occupancy*, and includes an addition built to an existing structure and, where applicable, the land adjoining a structure.

Compliance with *The Construction Codes Act*, *The Building Code Regulations*, *The Energy Code Regulations* and the National Building Code of Canada (NBC) 2020 is addressed in the advisory. Words in italics, other than Act and regulation titles, are defined in the NBC 2020.

Because shipping containers do not meet the prescriptive requirements found in the NBC, the local authority may request an engineering review and submission of plans certified by a professional engineer prior to issuing a building permit.

Issues of importance to recognize prior to construction approval include:

- Use and *occupancy*
- Structural inspection
- Foundation design
- Anchorage to the *foundation*
- Mechanical systems and ventilation
- Building envelope and exterior finish

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Regarding use and *occupancy*, any storage of *dangerous goods* as defined and regulated by the NFC should be disclosed to the local authority. *Dangerous goods* means those products or substances that are regulated by TC SOR/2001-286, "Transportation of Dangerous Goods Regulations. (TDGR)" or classified as controlled products under HC SOR/2015-17, "Hazardous Products Regulations."

All measures necessary to ensure their safe storage must be accommodated in the design, construction, and/or modification of the shipping container for that purpose. This may include limits on the volume of *dangerous goods* being stored, adequate ventilation, appropriate fire detection, alarm and suppression systems.

As with all development uses, the use of shipping containers as a *building* must meet zoning and all other bylaws applicable in a local authority. While some municipalities may accept shipping containers as *buildings*, other municipalities may limit their use through zoning controls.

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