

**STRATEGIC
ENFORCEMENT
PLAN**
FY26-FY28

Executive Summary

The Strategic Enforcement Plan for the Department of Buildings (DOB) is a high-level set of guideposts mandated by the Department of Buildings Establishment Act of 2020 to be prepared and submitted to the Council of the District of Columbia every three years. This is the second such plan, for FY26 – FY28. The plan identifies broad initiatives and directions within which budgets, projects, and other line-items will be developed as the plan unfolds.

DOB must conduct strategic enforcement across the entire District. The built environment in the District is extensive, with more than 300,000 habitable units, more than 100,000 addresses, and 20,000 acres of land. While DOB performed more than 60,000 enforcement-related inspections in FY25, changes recommended in this Strategic Enforcement Plan would enable DOB to perform more inspections in the future. In addition, while DOB has many areas of jurisdiction that are driven primarily by complaints or by mandated application from property owners, changes recommended in this Strategic Enforcement Plan would enable DOB to act more proactively.

Over the next three years, DOB enforcement will focus on four broad areas:

1. Gathering more knowledge about the built environment;
2. Conducting better inspections;
3. Managing relationships more effectively; and
4. Being proactive in more areas of agency action.

Within these areas, DOB will employ numerous strategies including process improvements, integration of artificial intelligence, and training and empowering staff.

Section I: About the Strategic Enforcement Plan for FY26—FY28



A. Why Have a Strategic Enforcement Plan?

The Department of Buildings Establishment Act of 2020 sets up a multi-layered enforcement reporting framework with both a triennial “Strategic Enforcement Plan” and an “Annual Enforcement Report.” The Strategic Enforcement Plan provides a long-term set of goals, and the Annual Enforcement Report measures the agency’s progress against those goals. The Strategic Enforcement Plan:

1. Sets priorities;
2. Identifies available and needed resources while integrating enforcement functions; and
3. Identifies ways to leverage the enforcement efforts of sister agencies.

See DC Official Code § 10-562.01.

The Annual Enforcement Report assesses the agency’s progress with the Strategic Enforcement Plan and identifies the need for operational changes. See DC Official Code § 10-562.02.

B. The Strategic Enforcement Plan and Annual Enforcement Report Do Not Replace the Budget Process

DOB goes through the same budget process as any other District agency. That process is one way in which priorities are established and resources are distributed for all DOB functions, including enforcement, and across all District agencies. The Strategic Enforcement Plan is meant to supplement, not supersede, the budget process.

The Strategic Enforcement Plan is a high-level policy document with a multi-year implementation window. The goal is to pursue long-term policy outcomes across multiple budget cycles. The Annual Enforcement Report is used to regularly review and evaluate the impacts of these long-term policy pursuits.

C. How Is the FY26—FY28 Strategic Enforcement Plan Different from the FY23—FY25 Strategic Enforcement Plan?

Compared to the FY23 – FY25 Strategic Enforcement Plan, the FY26 – FY28 Strategic Enforcement Plan (“the FY26 – FY28 Plan”) will reflect the following changes:

1. **Fewer project proposals.** The FY23 – FY25 plan focused on project proposals. Some were completed, but trying to plan strategic projects in advance of future budget and leadership decisions was not practical and limited the utility of the plan. This plan contains fewer project proposals.
2. **No timelines.** The FY23 – FY25 plan attempted to put timelines on proposals. Similar to the project proposals, projecting timelines for high-level projects multiple years in the future can be impractical and limit the utility of the plan. This plan avoids strict timelines.

Instead of making specific project proposals and timelines that may not hold two or three years in the future, the FY26 – FY28 Strategic Enforcement Plan:

1. Performs a deeper analysis of the current state of the built environment.
2. Discusses some of the current capability challenges facing DOB given the state of the built environment.
3. Includes broader proposals for public discussion and comment on and how to make progress on these issues.

These discussions include articulated priorities, resources, and inter-agency cooperation, as required by law. The FY26 – FY28 Plan builds on the legacy of the prior plan while incorporating lessons learned.

Section II: The Built Environment in the District of Columbia



District residents may be most familiar with DOB's work through the lens of a single issue or location, but DOB's enforcement does not happen in a vacuum. Any policy discussion must be grounded in the reality of the District's built environment. This section describes the built environment in the District, which is DOB's responsibility.

A. Area

The District of Columbia is 68.35 square miles, of which 61.126 is land (39,121 acres). DOB has no authority over waterways.

The Federal Government owns or controls 9,649 acres out of the 39,121 acres of land in the District, or 24.7%. DOB has no authority over federal land.

Another 9,039 acres of land in the District is "public space" that includes roads and sidewalks (23.1%). The length of all the roads and alleys is about 1,500 miles. DOB does not generally have authority over public space. Other agencies, including the Department of Public Works (DPW) and District Department of Transportation (DDOT), lead the maintenance of public space.

Removing water, federal land, and public space leaves about 20,433 acres that are primarily non-federal "private space" — privately-owned buildings and property lots that are under the direct authority and regulation of DOB. In other words, DOB's jurisdiction spans 32 square miles of private land scattered around a total area almost twice that size, divided by a web of public space, federal parks, and water.

B. Addressing, Square Suffix, and Lot Numbers

Another way to visualize the built environment is to think about addresses. [DOB controls the assignment of addresses](#) because when a new building is built, it needs an address.

Addresses can be changed and retired. For example, the most common way addresses change is when several small buildings are replaced by one large building. In that case, the previous addresses are then retired, and only the address of the new building remains active. DOB's processes are keyed to the active address of a property, but DOB must also be prepared to field inquiries from the public using retired or inactive addresses. Addresses are useful to strategic thinking to visualize scale. There are 144,379 primary addresses in the District according to the [Master Address Repository](#) (MAR). Primary addresses are the address for an entire building or property, without regard to how many sub-units it might have inside. DOB has regulatory authority over all these addresses, except for those that are federal.

Also, according to the MAR, 306,026 individual residential units exist in the District. These are the smaller divisions like condominiums, apartments, or units in cooperatives. A cooperative that is a single building with 30 units inside would likely have a single primary address with 30 unit addresses. Again, DOB has authority over most, but not all, of these units. For example, DOB does not have authority over the homes in Fort Leslie J. McNair on the Washington Channel or, more famously, over the White House at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW.

It is also important to remember that while addresses are the primary tool the general public uses to locate something in the built environment, there are also other identification numbers. Square, suffix, and lot numbers (SSLs) are used to identify specific parcels in the District's land records. Many times, a building with a single address also has a single SSL. But there are other situations where a building with a single address is built across multiple SSLs or a single large SSL has many street addresses. This is very common in Southeast, which has many "garden style" apartment complexes. These complexes have a single SSL, but numerous small buildings with their own street address numbers.

SSLs are important to understand for two main reasons:

1. **The information about a property's record owner, kept by the Recorder of Deeds is linked primarily to the SSL.** DOB uses information about record owners for numerous enforcement activities.
2. **Tax consequences and liens are placed on an SSL.** This has important enforcement considerations, especially regarding vacant properties.

These addresses and SSL numbers are also critical because the most basic unit of DOB enforcement is an inspection: going to a place to look at a thing. An address or a unit are the most common "places" that DOB goes to inspect. The SSL is usually where the consequences on the inspection are directed.

Zooming out, the work of DOB inspections and enforcement takes place over more than 1,000 miles of streets, at more than 100,000 addresses, and in more than 300,000 residential units. This Strategic Enforcement Plan recommends changes that DOB can make in this vast environment to get closer to achieving the strategic enforcement goal of making sure all residential units in the District have no code violations.

Section III: How DOB's Capabilities Measure Against the Built Environment



To further understand the strategic landscape of code enforcement in the District, one must understand how DOB performs its enforcement work. This section explains how inspections are conducted, including the back office that supports them. Then it compares DOB's current ability to execute these actions to the size and scope of the built environment. This comparison highlights the basic challenge that there are more targets than resources.

A. Inspection Process

Most DOB employees follow a common inspection process:

1. Contact any folks that need to be met at a specific location;
2. Travel to that location;¹
3. Gather information with their eyes, a camera, tablet computer, ruler, and other devices such as sound meters or receptacle testers; and
4. Return to the office to make enforcement determinations and ensure accurate record-keeping.

Only a limited number of inspections can be done per day, and inspectors need a variety of supports to effectively perform their inspections, including a vehicle, proper equipment, and various support staff. This is on top of all the back-office activity the other team members do, like issuing infractions, following up with respondents, and bringing folks into compliance.

With current equipment and methods, DOB inspectors can generally perform between six and 10 inspections per day. This means that over the course of a 220-day person-year,² an inspector can perform anywhere from 1,240 – 2,220 inspections. Currently, most types of inspections average closer to six per day. These numbers are important for strategic thinking because, when combined with the extent of the District's built environment, one can understand basic workloads for inspection goals.³

¹ DOB inspectors may walk or take public transit, but usually they are dispatched in a vehicle from the main office. DOB has a fleet of vehicles for official use that must be returned when not in use. Most, but not all, inspections are done by a single inspector. Therefore, DOB needs a large fleet of vehicles.

² One employee's full number of work days in one year, given weekends, holidays, and time off.

³ See Appendix for more discussion.

B. The Back Office

Inspectors are not independent. They are supported by other staff, including:

- Schedulers who manually schedule inspections or assist the automated scheduling system and make last-minute adjustments;
- A Support Services team that keeps the vehicles operational;
- An IT team that keeps computers, applications, databases, and other technological elements operational;
- Abatement and compliance review teams who determine if violations identified by the inspectors have been fixed;
- Administrative process teams who pursue and prosecute Notices of Infraction (NOIs), with fines assessed against the owners of properties who don't fix violations identified;
- An Alternative Resolution Team that tries to settle or resolve fines in difficult cases;
- Lawyers who argue the agency's case in administrative appeals;
- A customer service and public relations team that answers questions and conducts outreach; and
- Data analysts, management, legislative affairs, FOIA, HR, and other supporting teams.

C. DOB's Current Enforcement and Inspections Activities

So far, we have discussed basic defining characteristics of the built environment in the District as well as current logistical limits on inspections, one of the most fundamental enforcement activities. This section summarizes [enforcement](#) and [inspections](#) data from [DOB's Public Dashboard](#), as well as from DOB's latest Annual Enforcement Report. Both are invaluable strategic resources. The dashboard is updated daily and the Annual Enforcement Report has extensive details about the immediately preceding calendar year. Here is an overview of DOB's current activities.

Figure 1: DOB's Enforcement-related Inspections Conducted by Fiscal Year and Resulting Notices of Infraction

	Enforcement Inspections	Notices of Infraction
FY23	43,558	11,864
FY24	51,718	13,183
FY25	62,582	16,089

Figure 1 combines the inspection numbers from DOB’s public dashboard for all enforcement-related inspections that lead to fines through NOIs, which include:

- Housing and property maintenance code inspections, both complaint-based and proactive;
- Vacant building property maintenance inspections; and
- Illegal construction inspections.

These numbers exclude permit-based inspections, court ordered inspections, certificate of occupancy inspections, and inspections for basic business licenses.

This shows rapid and sustained improvement in DOB’s capacity to conduct enforcement inspections. Indeed, baseline inspection capability increased more than 40% over the first three years of DOB’s existence. The developments that led to this increased capacity were numerous, including filling and training more inspector positions, improving dispatching, and developing streamlined internal document processing procedures. These sometimes small improvements have had a large impact, and DOB will continue looking for ways to make similar improvements in the future.

Similarly, because permits and their associated inspections provide opportunities to gather information that DOB may use in enforcement, Figure 2 shows the number of permits issued and permit inspections by fiscal year. These capabilities have also grown.

Figure 2: DOB’s Permits Issued by Fiscal Year

	Enforcement Inspections	Permit Inspections
FY23	49,837	23,275
FY24	50,861	28,021
FY25	53,514	28,656

This growth is even more impressive given that DOB’s approved budget during the same three years remained approximately the same.

D. The Benefits and Deficits of a Complaint-Based System

The most common way to manage many large bodies of work is to respond to known problems when they arise. For the District government, that means responding to complaints from residents. According to DOB's [dashboard](#), in FY25, DOB conducted 22,687 complaint-based housing code inspections. This constituted 50% of total housing code inspections, with another 22,427 being proactive.

There are benefits to complaint-based systems, including:

1. **Complaint-based systems allow the agency to focus limited resources where they are needed most.** The District's 700,000 residents play a vital role in bringing dangerous issues to our attention. This allows the agency to focus on acute problems quickly.
2. **Responding to complaints is an important public service.** It is important to address concerns residents have identified. This helps ensure the government is responsive to the public and builds trust on the part of District residents.

But any complaint-based system also has deficits, including:

1. **In a complaint-based system, the agency is being reactive, not proactive.** This means complaint-based enforcement doesn't occur until there is already a problem. By the time a complaint is filed, the risk already exists or danger has already occurred, and DOB can only work to mitigate the results.
2. **Complaints, by definition, are submitted by people who are most inclined to complain. This risks bias in the system.** For every person complaining about a particular issue, there may be hundreds or thousands who do not. Complaint-based systems empower more informed and resourced individuals at the expense of individuals who may not have the information, resources, or trust to file a complaint.
3. **A lack of complaints doesn't mean there's a lack of problems.** Every day across the District, the built environment decays and degrades in ways that may not be obvious to the average resident. Therefore, areas with relatively few or no complaints might still be an important enforcement priority. A complaint-focused system may not adequately bring those areas to our attention.

Moreover, most residents are not housing or building code experts and may report things that are not actually code violations. At the extreme edge, residents may abuse the complaint process. This is acute when code violations are secondary problems to a long-running dispute between a landlord and a tenant over rent, or neighbors over impacts from construction on a property. Complaints can be used to harass or to try to gain advantage in litigation. Residents should consult a lawyer if seeking restitution or private damages. DOB has prepared two guides to help ([for residents](#), and [for property professionals](#)) under the previous Strategic Enforcement Plan for FY23 – FY25.

For these reasons, DOB is considering alternatives to complaint-based systems in FY26 – FY28. It is important to note, however, that responding to resident complaints will continue to be a part of any enforcement system DOB develops. The key factor that DOB is focusing on is the best balance between engaging in proactive enforcement activities and responding to complaints.

In the next section, we'll discuss some possible alternative enforcement pathways and how DOB is moving towards a more targeted and proactive stance.

Section IV: The Enforcement Pathways DOB Is Considering for the Next Three Years



The pillars of strategic thinking about code enforcement are:

1. Zooming out from a single-place mindset and looking at the whole built environment;
2. Understanding the logistics of how enforcement works, and the resources needed; and
3. the costs, benefits, and limits of complaint-based and proactive management processes.

For FY26 – FY28, DOB proposes four strategies: (1) more knowledge about the built environment; (2) better inspections; (3) managing relationships; and (4) being more proactive.

A. More Knowledge About the Built Environment

DOB's enforcement depends on having timely and accurate knowledge about the built environment. This includes both creating new sources of data and analyzing data that is already available to the agency. Here's what DOB will focus on in the next three years.

1. Risk-based Approaches

DOB will continue to develop its focus on risk-based analysis to target the areas of the built environment that need the most attention. Instead of moving mechanically and comprehensively through the entire built environment (like the hypotheticals in Appendix I, below) or solely reacting to complaints, analyzing risk allows resources to be directed where they are needed. DOB has several existing risk-based projects that it intends to refine over the next three years.

The first risk-based practice that will be continued and refined is the algorithm that drives proactive housing code inspections. A version of this **proactive algorithm** was originally developed by DOB's predecessor agency, the Department of Consumer and Regulatory Affairs (DCRA), and later codified by the DC Council in DC Law 25-141, the Proactive Inspection Program Act of 2024.

This codified the use of an algorithm for proactive housing inspections, and listed [12 different factors](#) to be used, if possible:

1. The type of building
2. Age of the building
3. Licensure status
4. Structure of the corporate license holder
5. Number and severity of violations at the property
6. Length of time the violations have been unabated
7. Number of Stop Work Orders on the property
8. Number of trash violations on the property
9. Whether the property is delinquent in property taxes
10. Whether the property is in an area with vulnerable populations
11. Whether the property is in an area with high childhood lead blood levels
12. Whether the property is in an area with high pediatric asthma

In FY26, DOB began refining its algorithm to incorporate more of these factors. As the algorithm changes, DOB will evaluate its effectiveness and make additional changes to improve its impact.

DOB is also developing **risk-based property alerts** across all of its disciplines and the entire property portfolio under DOB's purview. This tool is intended for internal District government use only and is still under development. It leverages DOB's existing data to direct escalated attention from managers and senior enforcers towards particular properties. Because it is inter-disciplinary, it will highlight enforcement needs in both existing buildings and buildings under construction.

2. Built Environment Alias Analysis

As explained earlier in Section II, DOB relies heavily on the record owner public information attached to the SSL for a property; however, record owners are often purpose-created limited liability companies, trusts, or other corporate entities. The true owner or manager is often a larger corporation, holding numerous properties, each with different entities and with ambiguous names. Finding the right person to talk to often requires extensive research. Pulling together all the properties that are managed by once group is an activity that DOB calls an "alias analysis."

DOB has piloted several programs in the past that conducted alias analyses on the properties with the highest number of outstanding housing code violations. These included:

- **The Outreach Abatement and Reconciliation (OAR) Program** – outreach to alias providers with high numbers of violations to inform them of how to return to compliance and discover why violations were not being addressed;
- Several special interventions that were more targeted than OAR, and somewhat more intensive, to test additional methods of working with housing providers; and
- Two targeted bouts (first example here, second example here) of escalated enforcement against problem providers who did not respond favorably to DOB’s other enforcement programs.

All of these programs were limited in scope. When it was launched, OAR targeted the top 30 properties with violations, and all the other interventions only targeted single ownership groups. These programs were successful for their scope—some increased the properties’ housing code abatement rates to 75% – 90%—and are ready to be replicated over more of the built environment under DOB’s authority.

During the duration of this FY26 – FY28 plan, DOB will develop a comprehensive version of the alias analysis. This will allow DOB to better know which buildings are owned by a group owner, what management company they are using, and who to contact to make sure enforcement is effective and abatement is secured. This will be difficult both to create and maintain because properties are sold and management companies change all the time. It will also require cooperation from, and education of, beneficial owners to make sure they know how to maintain their contact with DOB. While it will be difficult, it will be worthwhile to make sure that DOB always has a person on the other side of the table to discuss what is needed to come into compliance.

B. Better Inspections

Section III above explains the inspections process, the current capabilities of DOB, and how the agency has continued to grow capacity even with a limited budget. Over the period of this new Strategic Enforcement Plan, DOB will continue to work to grow the capacity and impact of its inspections with these strategies.

1. Bringing Inspection Disciplines Closer Together

DOB has at least eight different types of enforcement inspections:

1. Complaint-based housing code inspections
2. Proactive housing code inspections
3. Illegal construction inspections
4. Occupancy and zoning use enforcement inspections
5. Vacant property inspections
6. Boiler enforcement inspections
7. Elevator and conveyance enforcement inspections
8. DC Superior Court Landlord and Tenant Branch inspections

Each of these types of inspections involves different personnel, is requested by the public or is initiated in a different way, has different management, and differs widely in the post-inspection enforcement process. The agency is working to change that by integrated inspection disciplines.

The Office of Strategic Code Enforcement (OSCE) is already working to merge housing code inspections and vacant property inspections into a unified Field Team. Boiler and elevator inspections are also going to become more closely aligned with this larger team, as will occupancy and zoning use. Illegal construction inspections are more closely aligned with construction inspections within the Office of Construction and Building Standards (OCBS) and bringing those together will take more time. Over the three years of this Strategic Enforcement Plan, it is entirely possible that all of these inspection types become aligned within a single entity.

When the inspection types are aligned, the experience for the public will become more seamless and easier to navigate. Instead of having to request either or both an illegal construction or a housing inspection, the public will have a single point of entry to request any DOB enforcement inspection. DOB will then determine what enforcement response is necessary.

As this merger occurs, DOB will invest in its team through cross-training inspectors, providing more advancement opportunities, and allowing staff to simultaneously conduct multiple types of enforcement. For example, two separate inspections are currently conducted for a vacant property designation and a housing code citation. Soon, this will be a single operation. As the team becomes more cross-trained and experienced, it will also make DOB's workforce more flexible. Currently, if only a few employees call out due to illness, capacity for a single inspection area would be reduced until they recover. With more flexible training and assignments, it will be possible to temporarily surge team members to areas that need help. As a result, DOB will be able to consistently do more with the same number of team members.

2. Drive-by + Artificial Intelligence for External Violations

Another way to increase DOB's capacity to do inspections is to replace low-impact inspections and complaints with automation. Vacant property management and external property maintenance violations are ripe for this innovation.

There are about 4,500 vacant properties in the District. For DOB's purposes, property is only vacant if it is entirely vacant. A 100-unit apartment building with a single resident is considered occupied. Put another way, if somebody answers the door, DOB considers the property occupied.

A vacant property inspection is generally just an exterior scan of the property, augmented by knocking on the door (and the doors of neighbors) to gather additional opinions about whether the property has an occupant. Vacant properties must be maintained to standards that are largely the same as external property maintenance standards for occupied property.

DOB also has jurisdiction over all private owner-occupied property for the purpose of external property maintenance. None of the 100,000 private primary addresses in the MAR is exempt from external requirements. These inspections are very similar to vacant property inspections, except that the property is occupied. Indeed, as discussed above, vacant and occupied property inspections are two types of inspections DOB will be working to bring closer together.

As described in Appendix I, it would, for example, take 90 inspectors to physically inspect 100,000 exterior addresses twice a year. That would be an inefficient use of resources. In this case, there is a better way. Most residents are familiar with online maps that include a “street view” of an area that was created using photographs of a street taken by vehicles driving down it with panoramic cameras. These vehicles are a common sight in cities now, and multiple companies take such surveys. DDOT and the Office of the Chief Technology Officer (OCTO) are working with a company to secure a vehicle that can take panoramic pictures as it drives with the goal of surveying the entire District once per year. A single survey, reviewed by artificial intelligence (AI) to highlight violations, could replace the fieldwork of 100,000 inspections. This is also a more direct way to improve DOB’s efficiency in detecting vacant properties than trying to do more complicated things like predictive analyses. For more discussion of why DOB is looking away from those options, see Appendix II.

These tools would not eliminate the need for live inspectors, nor would they eliminate most of the back-office work that needs to be done after violations are spotted. They could, however, assist in augmenting inefficient complaint-based targeting with a comprehensive survey of the District that can guide DOB’s work to proactively apply fair standards to the entire built environment. DOB is already in discussions with multiple providers and will continue this inquiry during the duration of this Strategic Enforcement Plan, while looking for other areas where similar tools may be useful.

3. Empowering Inspectors in the Field

Inspectors in the field sometimes encounter properties where the overall situation is actually worse than the paper violations would indicate.

DOB is working to launch a “field alert” system that allows any inspector to raise any type of issue during any type of inspection. These alerts can be tracked by DOB management and OSCE to make sure the situation receives the appropriate escalated attention.

In addition to keeping the District safe, DOB must keep its team safe. DOB is developing new tools that allow staff to review crime data from the Metropolitan Police Department (MPD) and determine whether a pending inspection poses a risk. If so, the staff member will be able to request either a partner for that inspection or DOB management will be able to arrange for MPD personnel to be available nearby. When the team is secure, they can focus on the built environment and provide high quality code inspection results no matter where in the District they are called.

C. Managing Relationships

The primary focus of strategic code enforcement is on the built environment, but the relationships between interested parties are key to achieving positive results. DOB's primary goal in all enforcement activities is to get the owner, or owner's agent to take steps to abate a code violation. If DOB can't find an owner or owner's agent to work with, that's a problem. If a third party like a neighbor or tenant is obstructing that abatement, that's also a problem. During the period of this Strategic Enforcement Plan, DOB will actively work to build and maintain constructive relationships to increase the impact of our enforcement on the built environment.

1. Turning Vacant Properties into People

Currently, the field operations for vacant properties are primarily supported by the public record owner information on the property. During the duration of this plan, DOB will work to research the ownership of vacant properties and make this information available for day-to-day enforcement. This will be similar to the "alias analysis" for occupied properties but applied to a different property population. When DOB finds a partner on the other side to work with, compliance increases.

2. Promoting Property Owner and Tenant Accountability

Occasionally, there are conflicts between property owners and their tenants. These conflicts are usually civil matters and DOB does not take sides other than to advocate for the abatement of any violations under its purview. Any person in a civil dispute is encouraged to review DOB's guides [for residents](#) and for other [property professionals](#).

In promoting abatement in the built environment, DOB can nonetheless find itself in the middle of such conflicts. For example, DOB inspectors appear in Housing Conditions Court and conduct inspections for those actions. Similarly, DOB inspections and their results can be used as evidence in a variety of actions. DOB does not refuse any complainant service and inspects whenever called upon to do so.

For most violations, the property owner or manager fixes any violations. In a select few cases, tenants contribute to a delay in violation correction by not cooperating with owners or preventing access to the property. To this end, during the duration of this Strategic Enforcement Plan, DOB will be launching a tenant education letter. This letter will only be sent to tenants who are not cooperating in the abatement of identified violations. The letter will explain the property owner's right to access the property on reasonable notice and that the only way violations get fixed is if the property owner is allowed to fix them. These letters will also be numbered and tracked like other DOB issuances.

Versions of this idea have already been discussed with the Built Environment Enforcement Working Group and other stakeholders. One concern that was raised was that this issuance could be used by property owners in disputes with tenants as evidence that tenants are not fulfilling their obligations under the lease. This will be a purely educational letter that informs tenants of their rights and responsibilities and would not actually have legal import. DOB intends to limit this notice by reviewing the circumstances around abatement accommodation in the unit. Situations where the parties are working together in good faith to abate the violations at the property will not require this step. This will also provide an opportunity for DOB to answer additional tenant questions and connect them to helpful resources and information.

3. Continuing to Grow Interagency Cooperation

DOB developed numerous partnerships with other District agencies during the first three years of its existence, and this will continue for the duration of this Strategic Enforcement Plan. Here are some notable recent initiatives, and some coming attractions.

Office of the Attorney General

DOB's OSCE continues to work closely with the Office of the Attorney General (OAG). Shortly after the start of FY26, [OAG announced the largest housing conditions judgment in the history of the District](#), with DOB's support. Earlier in the year, at DOB's request, OAG brought [suit against the developer of a multi-family property](#) that performed illegal construction and illegally occupied the property with tenants. In total, the agencies are currently collaborating on cases involving more than 160 properties. DOB supports OAG cases to place properties into receivership, to prosecute nuisances, and even to bring criminal charges against commercial operators with building code violations. At the same time, the past three years have given both teams additional wisdom about these remedies. For example, receivership is not a panacea for all properties. Some properties cannot recover even when a receiver is appointed. Similarly, nuisance prosecutions are very narrow and require proof that a property is used for crimes associated with firearms, drugs, or prostitution. Despite these limits, DOB will continue to work hand in hand with OAG to bring the worst actors in the built environment into compliance.

Department of Licensing and Consumer Protection

The Department of Licensing and Consumer Protection (DLCP) is DOB's sister agency, created out of the former DCRA on October 1, 2022. It retains authority over many areas of interest to DOB, including licenses for rental properties, licenses for construction professionals, and consumer protection investigations. DOB also refers cases to the independent boards administered by DLCP, including the Board of Architecture, Interior Design, and Landscape Architecture; Board of Industrial Trades; and Board of Professional Engineers. In FY25, DOB referred more than 150 cases to DLCP for further enforcement.

Office of the Chief Financial Officer's Office of Tax and Revenue

The Office of the Chief Financial Officer (OCFO) Office of Tax and Revenue (OTR) is an essential partner to DOB on vacant and blighted properties and the collection of fines. DOB updates the tax classification of properties with OTR and files special assessments on them, as needed. If these assessments aren't paid, OTR holds tax sales to both collect the outstanding revenue and to bring in a new responsible owner to rehabilitate the property. In addition, DOB refers delinquent debt from fines to OTR's Central Collection Unit (CCU), which continues collection activity on the District's behalf.

District Department of Transportation

As explained in Section II, while DOB has general authority over private space, DDOT has general authority over public space in the District. This has led to many areas of collaboration both in the permitting space, where many customers need permission from both DOB and DDOT, and in the enforcement space. One example is the potential street surveys for exterior property inspections discussed earlier. DDOT already procures at least one of these surveys per year, and DOB is working to see how it can use utilize DDOT's expertise.

Department of Public Works

DPW is another public space partner for DOB. Both agencies have the ability and authority to cite things like trash and overgrown weeds, and both agencies can directly abate these violations. This results in numerous instances when DOB and DPW must coordinate and collaborate on an abatement need spanning public and private space, especially to abate large accumulations of trash. To provide more information, DOB appeared on [Part 1](#) and [Part 2](#) of the Inside DPW Podcast to discuss illegal dumping and their joint enforcement.

Metropolitan Police Department

MPD is an essential partner to DOB's enforcement teams. First, and most importantly, MPD assists DOB if its inspectors need support conducting an inspection. The safety of DOB's team is paramount and MPD's partnership here is invaluable. In addition, in situations where a property owner has evidence that a vacant property has unauthorized occupants, MPD assists DOB in clearing the building so DOB's abatement team can board and secure the property.

DOB's Work with Inter-Agency Task Forces

In addition, DOB routinely participates in inter-agency task forces, primarily through the work of the DOB Duty Officer – a DOB manager who is on-call 24 hours a day, seven days a week. The Duty Officer responds to calls from the DC Homeland Security and Emergency Management Agency (HSEMA) and the Office of Unified Communications (OUC) and is dispatched to the scene of fires, vehicles crashed into buildings, flooding, and any other emergency that has a direct impact on the built environment. The Duty Officer works with Fire and Emergency Medical Services, MPD, DLCP, the Alcoholic Beverage and Cannabis Administration (ABCA), and others to make sure the built environment is protected day and night. As part of this Strategic Enforcement Plan, DOB will be working over the next three years to improve the reliability and tracking of its Duty Officer response.

Office of the Tenant Advocate

One of the other partners the Duty Officer routinely calls is the Office of the Tenant Advocate (OTA). OTA has the power to provide temporary lodging when a building must be closed by DOB because of a fire, flood, or other damaged condition. In non-emergency circumstances, DOB and OTA often collaborate on outreach to properties where tenants may have questions about their rights, responsibilities, or conditions. DOB will be working with OTA over the duration of this Strategic Enforcement Plan to improve reliability and tracking of DOB closures and OTA referrals for emergency housing.

This is not an exhaustive list of DOB's agency partnerships. The District is one government, and DOB will always stand ready to work with any other agency partners who can promote strategic enforcement of the codes and the safety of the built environment.

4. Continuing the Built Environment Working Group

Started as part of the FY23 – FY25 Strategic Enforcement Plan, the Built Environment Enforcement Working Group is a quarterly meeting between DOB’s Strategic Enforcement Administrator and community stakeholders in DOB’s enforcement activity. Regular attendees include property owners, property managers, Advisory Neighborhood Commissioners, tenant advocates, and other advocacy organizations concerned with DOB’s work. This feedback from external stakeholders has been very helpful both in advising DOB’s day-to-day enforcement operations and in developing this new FY26 – FY28 Strategic Enforcement Plan. As a result, DOB intends to continue the Built Environment Enforcement Working Group for the duration of this plan.

D. Proactive Enforcement for Everything

Enforcement works better *when DOB is driving the enforcement cadence*. In Section III, the issues with waiting on complaints to conduct enforcement were examined at length. Waiting on a respondent or applicant can be equally damaging. Over the next three years, DOB will focus on bringing a spirit of proactive, DOB-driven enforcement to more of its disciplines.

1. Proactive Management of Vacant Properties

DOB had relied on property owners to affirmatively reach out to manage their vacant properties, or to respond to notices left on site. As a result, vacant properties currently have two large bursts of regulatory work, which are centered around the fact that OTR issues tax bills for properties twice a year.

DOB designating a property as vacant or blighted has tax consequences. Vacant properties are taxed at 5% of assessed value and blighted properties are taxed at 10% of assessed value. Occupied properties are taxed at much lower rates. Because the bills are only issued twice a year, that is when property owners routinely reach out to DOB. Indeed, property owners often reach out days before property taxes are due, or even the same day, urgently requesting reclassification and providing information that could or should have been provided to DOB months earlier. It’s not efficient, or sometimes even possible, to turn around reclassifications in so short a time. DOB must confirm occupancy by inspection, which cannot always be scheduled immediately, and processing exemptions takes time. On the other end of the spectrum are properties where the owners apparently are ignoring the taxes and doing nothing. This requires DOB to frequently abate violations on those properties, which can be a nuisance to neighbors and passersby.

One way to address these problems is to perform the work proactively, earlier in the tax billing cycle. There are 4,500 vacant properties in the District and, presumably, all the owners of those properties want to qualify for an exemption from the higher tax rates. DOB can attempt to conduct a systemic assessment of qualifications for vacancy exemptions and reach out to owners *before* tax bills to make the owners aware of the types of available exemptions and the process and timelines for requesting and receiving an exemption.

This is a transformation from the way DOB previously operated, which was to wait for property owners to reach out. This process already started on October 1, 2025, when DOB began implementing the provisions of the [new vacant property legislation](#) that were not subject to appropriations. Moving forward, DOB will continue making changes with the goal of conducting wholistic and proactive management of a property's status from the moment it becomes vacant until it returns to productive use. For more discussion of the changes this new legislation has made, see Appendix II.

2. Proactive Inspections for Elevators and Boilers

Elevators and boilers are subject to special affirmative inspection requirements. Elevators and other conveyances are supposed to renew certifications regularly and secure inspections from third parties. Boilers are similar. Currently, these duties fall on property owners, who are required to renew the certificates and get the inspections at the right cadence. When renewals arrive, DOB reviews and processes them. DOB also responds to specific complaints about these certifications and brings them into compliance if they are out of compliance but otherwise does not proactively follow up with property owners that stop renewing certifications.

During the duration of this Strategic Enforcement Plan, DOB intends to drive renewal and recertification through regular engagement or inspection. Elevators and boilers usually exist for the life of a building and if they are uninstalled, DOB should be informed through permitting and inspections. As a result, DOB can assume that any device that was previously certified should remain certified at the right interval, indefinitely. If a device fails to renew a certification, DOB will inspect to see the paperwork on-site and issue a citation, if needed, to return the device to compliance.

This initiative will also help bring boiler and elevator inspections operations in closer alignment to the other inspection types. In fact, by using inspectors who are not boiler or elevator experts to check the paperwork related to the device, DOB can get broader coverage for these devices even with a limited number of specialists. This will ease the burden of compliance on property owners as well, as they will not have to independently remember to renew and service these devices.

3. Proactive Permit Enforcement

DOB's permit review team works hard to review permits and make sure all construction in the District can be done safely and according to code. DOB has also started proactively connecting its permit review team to its enforcement team. When the permit review team sees what appears to be permit fraud or abuse, they refer the case internally to OSCE's investigations unit.

DOB's team has uncovered the fraudulent use of licensed professionals' names and stamps, the use of deceased professionals' credentials, and drawings that appear to be doctored by licensed professionals, agents, or expeditors. Where this occurs, DOB has a process to investigate. If the concerns are substantiated, DOB either guides the party back into compliance, forces them to surrender the permit, or takes escalated enforcement action, such as issuing a correction order and/or referring the issue to OAG.

4. More DOB Abatement

DOB attempts to empower property owners to abate violations it identifies, and abatement is the owner's legal responsibility. But when a property owner is not abating an important item, DOB has the capacity to step in.

DOB has both an internal team that performs small-scale abatements like cleaning up trash and clearing grass and weeds, as well as various contractors who can perform larger jobs. DOB has the authority to abate any violation in the built environment but must prioritize abatements according to resource availability. Thus, DOB's abatement will be primarily focused on the following types of life-safety violations:

- Open and accessible or hazardous vacant properties;
- Imminent structural instability in any part of the built environment, including occupied buildings or buildings under construction; and
- Life-safety violations inside of occupied properties, such as missing and broken smoke detectors and fire extinguishers.

When DOB abates a violation directly, the property owner is billed for the cost. These [rates are not cheap](#). The cost is then converted to special tax assessment on the property. These assessments are automatic once the work is performed and can only be appealed to DC Superior Court following payment. DOB typically collects more than 50% of the face value of its special assessments in a year (and in FY25, DOB collected more than 70% of the face value of its special assessments). Special assessments produce a high percentage return on investment compared to fines, where collections do not normally exceed 25%. Property owners who do not want to receive DOB special assessments must maintain their properties themselves and perform needed work before DOB performs it on their behalf.

DOB abatement is a powerful tool to ensure compliance. It is magnified by the [Board for the Condemnation of Insanitary Buildings](#) (BCIB). This is an independent board, although DOB supports its operations and has seats. BCIB has the power to order property owners to provide plans to return properties to habitability and can refer properties to DOB for direct abatement.

DOB will grow these capabilities as much as possible during the duration of this Strategic Enforcement Plan, according to resource availability. DOB's Nuisance Abatement Fund supplies money for abatement, but it's used for other purposes and fluctuates depending on the return from funding sources.

Nevertheless, DOB will continue to work to increase the speed and efficiency of its internal and contract capacity to abate violations directly. DOB will do this by expanding the internal team's capabilities and by increasing its ability to contract out abatement work. DOB is examining the option to contract single jobs to smaller contractors on a flat fee basis through an expansion of its [Resident Inspector Program](#) to also include abatement contractors. DOB will work to strategically increase its ability to perform direct abatement in a way that maximizes impact and keeps the built environment safe.

Conclusion



Strategic planning is essential for an agency like DOB that must regulate a vast built environment of more than 100,000 addresses, 300,000 rental units, and 20,000 acres of private land, scattered among a larger aggregate of roads, parks, and federal holdings. DOB has grown its capabilities over the first three years of its existence and has performed more than 60,000 enforcement inspections already. The next three years will require new strategies to extend DOB's impact. To that end, DOB will:

1. Extend its knowledge of the built environment by continuing to develop risk-based approaches, leveraging artificial intelligence, and performing a comprehensive alias analysis on the District;
2. Improve inspections by bringing the different disciplines closer together, consider investments in automation and AI, and empower inspectors in the field to elevate risks using judgment;
3. Continue to grow and manage its relationships by encouraging both property owner and tenant accountability, improving identification of vacant property stakeholders, working with sister agencies, and continuing the success of the Built Environment Enforcement Working Group; and
4. Increase the proactivity of its vacant property, elevator, and boiler programs and building capacity to perform direct abatement.

With these strategies, DOB will continue to build on its foundation for success and keep the District safer, greener, and productive for years to come.

Appendix I: Comparison of the Size of the Regulated Environment to Hypothetical Inspection Coverage Goals



Workloads for Theoretical Inspection of Global Parts of the District's Built Environment.

Theoretical Coverage Goal	Inspections Needed	Inspections per Inspector per Year	Inspectors Needed Solely for this Task
Inspect the outside of all 100,000+ primary addresses twice a year for external violations.	200,000	2,220 (external inspections can be done more quickly)	90
Inspect the inside of all 300,000+ residential units once a year for life-safety violations	300,000	1,240 (internal inspections tend to take longer)	242
Totals	500,000		332

Theoretical Global Strategic Enforcement Goals as Compared to Work-Years of DOB's Current Capabilities

Theoretical Coverage Goal	Inspections Needed	DOB Yearly Capabilities	Years Needed at Current Rate
Inspect the outside of all 100,000+ primary addresses twice a year for external violations.	200,000	62,582 (Enforcement Inspections FY25)	3 years, 2 months
Inspect the inside of all 300,000+ residential units once a year for life-safety violations	300,000	62,582 (Enforcement Inspections FY25)	4 years, 10 months

While these numbers are hypothetical (no jurisdiction inspects every housing unit every year), they help highlight that broad proactive coverage goals in the District's built environment require large amounts of resources. Bear in mind that 332 inspectors is significantly more than the current number of inspectors DOB employs. In fact, the total number of *all* current DOB employees is only 397, including all plan review, zoning, management, and back-office support staff. This Strategic Enforcement Plan identifies changes DOB can make to achieve its goals within current resource levels.



In conjunction with the passage of the Vacant to Vibrant Amendment Act of 2025 (DC Law 26-41, “Vacant to Vibrant”), this appendix takes a closer look at some issues facing vacant properties in the District.

A. The District is Very Aggressive in Vacant Property Regulation Compared to Other Jurisdictions; DC Law 26-41 Provided Some Relief

There are three basic types of vacant property regulation across the United States:⁴

- Fees for registering properties as vacant or unused;
- Increased taxes or fees on empty or unused properties (sometimes measured by linear feet of empty store frontage); and
- Increased taxes or fees on abandoned or blighted properties.

Different jurisdictions apply these—or prohibit them—at different levels. Virginia, for example, has not imposed a vacant property tax statewide, and also prohibits municipalities from doing so on their own. Virginia does allow imposition of a fee of no more than 100\$.⁵ Some jurisdictions choose to require this fee (for example, the City of Alexandria); others do not (for example, Arlington County and Fairfax County).

Maryland passed a law to allow local jurisdictions to set vacant property tax rates in 2024.⁶ The City of Baltimore recently passed vacant property taxes that range from about 7% to 9% of assessed value.⁷ Baltimore County also imposes a tax of \$10 per \$100 of assessed value on vacant and uninhabitable property.⁸ With respect to vacant property registration fees, Montgomery County, Maryland, has no vacant registration fee, but allows smaller towns to impose them. Some Montgomery County towns have vacant registry fees of up to \$200.

⁴How Cities and States Can use Vacant Property Taxes to Spur Housing Development, Nicke Kilby, CUNY Institute for State & Local Governance, December 4, 2025, islg.cuny.edu/blog/vacant-property-taxes-to-spur-housing-development

⁵Code of Virginia 15.2-1127.

⁶MD Tax – Property Code § 9-234; and saltzman-law.com/marylands-new-vacancy-tax-law/

⁷Baltimore City Code Article 28 § 11-1(a)(4); and conduitstreet.mdcountries.org/2024/11/19/baltimore-city-targets-bligh-with-new-vacancy-tax/

⁸baltimorecountymd.gov/departments/county-executive/news/baltimore-county-announces-legislation-28

Before portions of Vacant to Vibrant went into effect on October 1, 2025, the District's vacant property regime was arguably the most comprehensive and aggressive in the area, or even the nation. The District imposed all three levels of vacant property regulation, with a tax rate of \$10 per \$100 of assessed value for properties designated vacant and blighted and a maximum tax rate of \$5 per \$100 of assessed value for properties designated vacant but not blighted. And, for all those properties there was a registration fee of \$250.

The District also only levied designations on whole properties or lots, and does not use the "linear feet of vacant frontage" measurement to extend higher taxes to properties that are only partially vacant. The District granted up to three years of various exemptions to owners of non-blighted properties before Vacant to Vibrant.

Vacant to Vibrant continues to apply all three levers of vacant property regulation, but has extended the aggregate length of exemptions an owner can receive to five years. Vacant to Vibrant also makes the highest tax rates for vacant and blighted properties phase in across several years, while keeping the same top tax rates. It also increased the registration fee to \$350 for the first year of vacancy and \$500 every year afterwards.

B. The District's Vacant Property Regulation Has Not Substantially Changed Aggregate Vacancy, and Most Properties Return to Productive Use in Under Five Years

DOB is continually improving its tracking and regulation of vacant properties and its coordination with OTR. During the first years since its creation, DOB has performed substantial cleanup and reconciliation of its vacant property list and increased its inspections of vacant properties every year. However, despite all this, DOB's internal data reflects that the number of aggregate vacant properties has remained relatively constant at about 3% of all SSLs in the District since 2013.

In addition, DOB's data indicates that most properties return to productive use in under five years.

Appendix II Figure 1: Date of First Vacant Inspection for Properties Vacant as of May 2026

Age of First Inspection	Percent of Properties in the District
Less than 2 years prior	49.3%
2 to 5 years prior	23.3%
5 to 10 years prior	19.2%
More than 10 years prior	8.2%

Together these facts raise interesting questions about the impact of the District’s vacant property regulation.

First, a relatively stable number of vacant properties, despite a large amount of churn on and off of the vacancy list, with an increasing number of DOB inspections over the years, strongly suggests that DOB is detecting and classifying all or substantially all properties that are actually vacant. If there were a large body of undetected vacant properties then one would expect more inspection capacity would lead to increases in the total number of properties.

Second, if the goal of the program is to actually reduce the number of vacant properties, that goal may be running into structural limitations in the District’s property market. There will always be some vacant properties as people move and rehabilitate properties, and the target vacancy rate should not be zero.⁹ It is also hard to tell whether maintaining this level of vacancy is due to the District’s enforcement mechanisms, or whether there would be more vacant properties with a more permissive regime.

⁹Kilby, *supra*

Third, the fact that almost 75% of properties return to productive use within five years broadly dovetails with Vacant to Vibrant allowing up to five years of exemptions. The law from October 1, 2025, forward—the date Vacant to Vibrant provisions that are not subject to appropriations went into effect—should provide a framework that allows most property owners to return vacant properties to productive use without paying higher tax rates. If the goal is to have most properties return to use within five years, then the program is successful. However, if the goal is to rehabilitate long-term distressed properties, there is still work to be done for those approximately 1,250 properties across the District that take longer than five years to return to productive use.

C. Predictive Statistical Models Are High Effort and Limited in Precision

There has been scholarly interest in trying to create statistical models to predict vacancy. The U.S. Census Bureau, for example, built a model using data from the Internal Revenue Service, Social Security Administration, Center for Medicare and Medicaid Services, and U.S. Postal Service. But, notably, even with the power of all these datasets, of the top 1% of properties mostly likely to be vacant, only 70% were verified as actually vacant.¹⁰

Another, older model in Syracuse, New York, did not attempt to actually predict vacancy, and instead identified at risk properties and neighborhoods “on the bubble.”¹¹ But simply identifying a neighborhood as at risk is not particularly precise.

Because DOB is likely already successfully identifying most or almost all actually vacant properties, and because 75% of those properties are turning over within five years, it’s not clear what using an algorithm to predict a vacant property will achieve. Arguably, if you developed an algorithm with a low false positive rate, you could try to use it to replace complaints by the public. But where the resources of the Census Bureau and data from across the federal government only yielded a true positive rate of 70%, this seems like a challenge.

¹⁰Predicting Vacant Housing Units in the American Community Survey, Andrew Keller, Tom Mule, Dorothy Barth, U.S. Census Bureau, December 3, 2024, census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/working-papers/2024/acs/2024_Keller_01.pdf

¹¹Predictive Analytics Can Facilitate Proactive Property Vacancy Policies for Cities, Sheila U. Appel, Derek Botti, James Jamison, Leslie Plant, Jing Y. Shyr, Lav R. Varshney, Technical Forecasting and Social Change, November 2014, [Predictive analytics can facilitate proactive property vacancy policies for cities - ScienceDirect](https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0926641014000000)

D. Proactive Management of Known Vacant Properties, and Identification of Property Maintenance Violations with Drive-By Cameras Are a Better Way Forward

As an alternative to an algorithm, as discussed in the main document, there are already mature technologies to take detailed pictures of the streetscape from vehicles, and existing companies marketing these images to government agencies and others. There are also already companies using AI to analyze the content of the pictures and flag potential code violations. This has the advantage of being able to check for vacancy and occupied property maintenance code violations. It also more directly replaces the experience of the neighborhood's residents, because it is based on the physical presentation of the home, as opposed to paper or process indications of vacancy. DOB intends to investigate this camera-based process.

E. What's Working and What's Less Effective

The District's vacant property regulation process is quite successful at identifying vacant properties and subjecting them to higher tax rates. The rates themselves are high by national standards, and every day DOB fields inquiries from property owners seeking exemptions from those rates. This shows that the tax rates themselves, and not registration fees or fines surrounding the process of registry, are what drives customer engagement with the process. The tax rates can be imposed within 90 days of inspection under the new timelines for Vacant to Vibrant. This is extremely quick compared to the adjudication process for fines, which can take months or years if contested.

For these reasons, DOB's future efforts will work to maximize the impact of proper vacant and blighted tax classification changes, while also maximizing the owner's ability to take advantage of any legal exemptions. This is the core of the vacant property regulations and their most effective component.

On the other hand, both the process of soliciting and trying to secure a small fee for vacancy registration and the process of trying to adjudicate civil fines for failure to register are burdensome on the agency and have minimal impacts on compliance. The registration fees, for example, even after the Vacant to Vibrant increases, are so small that they would not subject a property to tax sale for five years if left unpaid (taxes owed must exceed \$2,500 to be placed up for tax sale). Fines from failure to register would similarly require multiple instances and then can take more than a year to levy and adjudicated at the Office of Administrative Hearings.

As a result, DOB has strategically de-prioritized these procedural fines and supports the repeal of the vacant property registration fee itself. Limited resources will be better invested by focusing on the core property tax designation and exemption process. A simpler process will better serve residents and will prompt quicker return to productive use by reducing barriers to compliance.



DEPARTMENT OF BUILDINGS

1100 4th Street SW, Washington, DC 20024

dob.dc.gov | dob@dc.gov | 202.671.3500

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