

Elevators out in 20-storey West End condo tower? Call the fire department

Strata manager's note says maintenance company troubleshooting the problem, but adds 'currently no diagnosis nor ETA for the elevator service to be restored'

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The second of two elevators at The Sterling, a 20-storey condo building at 1050 Smithe St., went out of service last week. The other elevator has been shut down for far longer. Photo by Arlen Redekop /PNG

One of the elevators in a 20-storey condo called The Sterling in the West End has been broken for months. Then last week the remaining elevator also got shut down. This has residents trekking up and down the staircase with no indication of when the elevators might be back in service. "Right below me is an elderly couple. That's the thing I am most concerned about. I'm not happy about hoofing it up all these floors, but I can do it," said resident Dave McKay, who is in his 40s and lives on one of the higher floors in the building, which was completed in 2005.

There are people in the building with young children, persons with disabilities and pets that have to be taken out every day, he said.

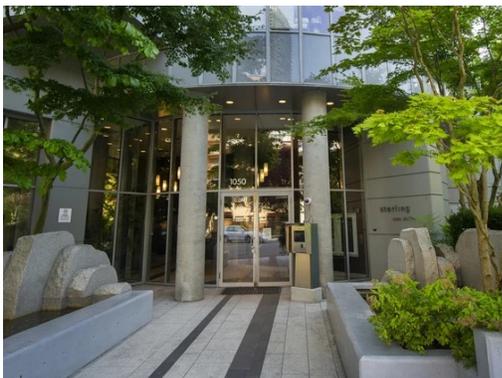
A note from the strata manager says an elevator maintenance company is troubleshooting the ongoing issue with the remaining elevator. It also says there is "currently no diagnosis nor ETA for the elevator service to be restored."

It also adds that if assistance is required while the elevator is down, and it's not possible to use the stairs, residents should contact the fire department for assistance.

"They shouldn't be saying that. We aren't going to be doing that. Of course, if there's an emergency or a medical call, our crews will be there," said Matthew Trudeau of Vancouver Fire and Rescue Services.

He said city inspectors can follow up and ask questions about timelines and confirm that reasonable actions are being taken to restore service by requiring copies of receipts and work orders.

In February 2021, Vancouver city council passed a motion to ensure residents with health and mobility issues have support when building elevators break down. This was billed as a good first step to addressing concerns raised by seniors living in low-rise buildings and city councillors Jean Swanson and Christine Boyle.



But last April city staff reported back and said the city doesn't have the authority to compel building owners to have plans in place and assist residents when elevators are out of service.

The entrance to 20-storey Sterling condominium tower at 1050 Smithe St. in the West End, where both elevators are out of service. Photo by Arlen Redekop /PNG

According to the relevant section in the Vancouver Charter, council can only make bylaws requiring elevators be maintained in an operational condition at all times and repairs be undertaken and completed as quickly as possible.

The city has developed resources to encourage building owners to assist residents and to inform residents on how to be prepared and what to do.

The April 2022 memo from staff to council noted it is difficult to estimate the number of people severely affected by elevator service outages and the city lacks data on the number of residential buildings that have only one elevator. It said the city's online and 311 complaint data from the last five years (2018 to March 2022) show an average of 20 complaints received each year about elevators in residential buildings, with about 10 per cent of these complaints being from seniors and persons with disabilities.

While newer elevator systems can be less reliable and need more maintenance, it can be hard to find parts for elevators that are older. In general, there is a shortage of elevator companies, technicians and tradespeople at the same time that more people are living in apartments and condos. The rights and responsibilities of condo homeowners are not mandated by municipalities, but governed by the province under the Strata Property Act.

Beyond this, it's a complicated situation for inexperienced managers and strata councils to handle, according to Tony Gioventu, executive director for the Condominium Home Owners' Association.

"Elevator contracts are incredibly complicated, and they result in serious contract deficiencies and disputes with owners because of exclusive and proprietary exclusions. I strongly recommend strata councils consult with a shrewd, experienced lawyer familiar with these types of negotiations," said Gioventu. "Rates can be out of control, with no accountability in the contracts for failure to provide reliable services."

FirstService Residential manages the building and said it is an agent of the strata corporation, which did not reply to Postmedia's questions on Tuesday.

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