

ASK THE INSPECTOR COLUMN FOR APRIL 20, 2016
HEADLINE: BUYING A GROW-OP HOME

A couple of weeks ago at an inspection, a client said they heard of a former grow op home that was coming up for auction. They decided to pass, but were still curious. Assets seized under the procedure of crime legislation are managed by the Seized Property Management Directorate (SPMD), a federal agency. It's fairly well known that the government has a warehouse full of fancy cars, boats and other pleasure toys along with real estate that drug dealers and other criminals have accumulated. Police estimate that the number of operating grow-op homes range upwards to 50,000 in Canada and well into the six figures in the US. And, even so, one police officer that I spoke to some time ago related that they only seize a small percentage.

Grow homes, one of which our reader was interested in, can be a tough sell and an even more difficult home to buy for a number of reasons, even aside from the fact that these houses pick up a reputation and "street talk" that can be very cruel.

Though not every location is publically known nor under SPMD control, I have been called in to a number of homes in the past few years that were suspected to be grow-op's. The largest single indicator is air quality and mold related issues. In one, the presence of a damp, musty smell when we opened the door led to an investigation and the conclusion that it was, indeed, a grow house. In another example, the home owner, who had rented out the home, called us in. There was mold on nearly every wall in the house. It was in the winter and the home had been vacant and closed up for a month or so. The air quality was so bad that we refused to work in the home at that time. Due to the high risk factors, some fire and water damage reclamation companies will not bid on cleaning up these homes. Both homes were eventually inspected and we advised that the buildings be gutted to the studding and subfloor and that all of the insulation be removed, as well.

Buying as is, which is how these are sold, requires a lot of due diligence. I recommend you first contact your home insurance company. A number of them will not insure a former grow home no matter what the condition, so you may have to look around. Some mortgage companies have taken a similar stand. In one home we inspected, we found a number of conditions that led me to believe that this was a grow home. When I showed him the issues, the real estate agent was visibly shaken; he led his clients out the door. They usually don't know either.

What are some of the other signs of a grow-op home? First is the price; if it's cheap there has to be a reason. It could be that the home has been abused by occupancy or that it lacked maintenance or is a bank foreclosure. Grow-ops use a lot of power, so another tell-tale sign is to check the electrical panel. If there are a number of knock-outs open or if the wiring appears to have been majorly altered, these will be hints. Next, look inside the closets; if the ceiling has been repaired recently this may mean the venting ducts were run

through the closet to the attic. If the basement is unfinished, check the wood assembly. Multiple screw holes can indicate an area where marijuana was hung up to dry. If the attic decking is dark stained, that's another sign. Take an inspector with you who has a Thermal Imaging Camera and knows how to use it. These cameras are good at detecting excess dampness.

To answer the reader's inquiry, I would want to see this home at the bare wood frame, including the basement walls cleaned out. In one instance, the marijuana grower had cut out floor joists for ventilation ducting and had, thereby, severely weakened the building. They had run large ducts for venting and, in one case, used turbine roof vents for the exhaust. The result was that the attic roof sheeting was layered in mold. The entire roof needed to be replaced; frame and all.

The electrical supply is usually bypassed and illegally wired. I know of one home where the block wall was broken out and a tunnel dug to bypass the meter and connect to the "live" underground supply. I saw the pictures for this one and the foundation had to be rebuilt on one side of the home. They know they are only there for a short time so any thought of the building's integrity is not a concern to a grower. In order to get the necessary lighting, the branch wiring is "hot wired" for more lights. In one of the homes, the actual panel had gotten so hot that the electrical contractor said it had to be replaced.

The heating systems are usually abused, too. In a home with elevated humidity, constant operation and no maintenance, this can bring a furnace to its knees very quickly. One grow-op report that crossed my desk advised that the ductwork be torn out due to air quality issues and contamination in the ducting; it was cheaper to replace it than try to clean it. Grow-ops use water, a lot of water and the plumbing is usually altered.

Another issue is the grower's use of the home. They are usually transient occupied and trashed. In one instance, they left a guard dog in the home and he defecated everywhere. The only solution was to remove the subfloor, cut the stained portion of the floor joists out and then sister new floor joists in beside the original ones.

Do your due diligence here. Have your mortgage and insurance in place. Get a renovation permit. The home should be gutted to the studs, all floor coverings removed, all insulation removed and the basement clear to the foundation. Don't forget the attic here. This type of cleanout should be done by a professional cleaning company, experienced in this type of work. Contact an environmental engineering company and get an analysis done for air quality. Call in the Electrical Safety and have them give the entire electrical system a full review and issuance of a letter of integrity. Same for the heating system, a TSSA licensed contractor should inspect the furnace and supply/return ducting system. A licensed plumber should be called in when the building is gutted to correct any plumbing issues. If any wood framework has been compromised, a qualified carpenter is necessary.

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