

Property owners must keep the retaining walls on their property in safe condition — and people whose properties are separated by a retaining wall share responsibility for maintaining it. NYC Administrative Code §28-301.1.

Retaining walls are permanent, protective structures that separate lower land from higher land. They are barriers that hold back soil, which would otherwise cave in, slump or slide into a lower area. Retaining walls are typically built with stone, brick, cinder blocks or concrete.

Property owners must maintain the retaining walls on their property. The Department of Buildings issues violations to owners for failing to do so and — in the most serious situations — our inspectors can issue violations requiring the immediate repair of unsafe conditions. The costs can add up quickly, since retaining walls often have multiple violations that must be corrected.

Signs of Structural Problems

There are visible conditions that can reveal serious safety issues. Consult with a New York State licensed professional engineer or registered architect if you see any of the following problems:

- Walls leaning out of alignment;
- Cracks or holes in the soil or pavement along the top of the wall;
- Soil or pavement swelling at the bottom of the wall;
- Severe cracks, bulging or displaced material within the wall;
- Water accumulating behind or at the top of the wall from poor drainage; or
- Water leaking through cracks or clogged weep holes.

Issues That Can Affect Stability

- Regularly check retaining walls since freeze-and-thaw weather cycles can damage them over time.
- New construction near a retaining wall can undermine its stability.
- Contractors should take all precautions to prevent problems, such as installing shoring or bracing.
- Property owners should protect their retaining walls from repeated impacts. For example, parking bumpers can prevent cars from bumping into and damaging a retaining wall in a parking lot.

Registering a Complaint

If you're concerned about the safety of a retaining wall in your neighborhood, call 311 to register a complaint, which will be forwarded to the Department of Buildings. An inspector will visit the site to determine the wall's condition.