

why building codes

are in the homeowners best interest



by Donald C. Forry
Director of Code Compliance
Manheim Township

Building codes mean many things to many people that are involved in a renovation and addition project as part of a single-family home. Being involved in code administration and inspections for over 23 years I can tell you there is definitely value added to the overall project when building codes are taken into account. The building permit process is a means to hold all parties accountable at certain stages of the construction work.

It is amazing to me that homeowners do not take more time to select a quality builder who can provide them with a current portfolio and references for the projects of their type, i.e. addition with habitable space, sun room, deck, garage, renovation of an existing house, finishing of a basement or a kitchen makeover. Adequate time and research must be put into the selection of the contractor in order to ensure that the contractor is a good fit for the homeowner, the type of work, as well as both parties' schedule. The contractor should start the work on time and finish the work on time, within budget, with minimal amount of change orders, be able to clearly communicate, and

deliver a quality finished product meeting expectations.

Generally, most building contractors have no problem in dealing with the building code process. They know the local government rules and regulations for obtaining a permit, are familiar with the building code ordinance, zoning ordinance and have a positive working relationship with the local building code officials. Take the time to ask for a list of members of the local Building Industry Association. They have information regarding how to select a contractor and plan the project.

Quite often, the low price is not the best route to take. There may be scheduling problems, difficulty obtaining the permit and inspection approvals, work may not be done on time and the quality of the work may not be satisfactory.

A good builder looks at the building permit process as another set of eyes looking over their shoulder to ensure the work is meeting the minimum standards set forth by the Pennsylvania Uniform Construction Code. Currently, the 2006 International Residential Code is the standard that builders must follow

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when performing additions or renovations. There are some exceptions for alterations /renovations in municipalities who have not adopted ordinances that require permits for such work in single-family homes.

Like any successful project, thorough planning cannot be overlooked. A legible and accurate set of plans and specifications reviewed and approved by all must be submitted to the local municipality for their review and approval. Also, a building permit fee will be assessed based on value of renovation work or square footage of the addition. If necessary, a preliminary inspection and/or meeting should be arranged with the building code official to resolve any unforeseen design or



code questions. This is also an opportunity for the homeowner and the builder to meet with the building code official and develop a working relationship.

In the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, building permits are required to be reviewed within 15 working days of their filing date. If the plans and specifications are found to be inadequate, the building code official is obligated to provide a plan review correction list itemizing the various building code deficiencies. Often, the zoning department

requires a site plan for any addition. I have seen poorly drawn site plans delay projects for weeks. Therefore, it is important to contact the zoning official as part of the addition process.

Once the permit is issued, it is important for the contractor to pay close attention to the required inspections which are generally noted with the building permit. Inspections include footings, foundation, rough-in plumbing, mechanical and electrical, framing, energy and the finals. Upon completion

of most projects, the local municipality will issue a certificate of use and occupancy to the homeowner which verifies the project meets both zoning and construction codes at the time of the work. The certificate is important to many lenders as evidence the work has been done in accordance with the building code. A copy of the building permit application also is sent to the appropriate County tax assessment office for their records. Some people like to skirt around this portion of the process; however, at some point all homes will be reassessed.

A few tips to remember before entering into a contract for your project: Request a copy of the contractor's insurance. Make sure the contract is complete, easily understood and detailed. Most importantly, the contract should state in writing what you want in terms of materials, products and finishes. Also there should be a firm price for the work, a payment schedule, and a contingency agreement for work that is not included in the contract. Take the time to make sure that you are comfortable with the contract and it spells out your responsibilities as well as the contractor's. An architect or engineer should be consulted to evaluate and design structural elements outside the normal scope of the code.

In closing, the primary purpose of building codes is to insure and provide for the health, safety and welfare of the building occupants, those who visit the home as well as future homeowners. Our homes are one of our largest financial purchases and proper attention needs to be given in order to sustain our safety and investments.

Don Forry also serves as a member of the Board of Directors for Pennsylvania Building Code Officials and was founder and past president of the Lancaster County Code Association.

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