

New nationwide building standards implemented in Fairfield

As City staff members of the Community Development Department, we interface quite often with architects, engineers, developers and home improvement folks that express compliments about the City's efficient permitting and building process.

In Fairfield, the Public Works Building Division enforces all building standards, including, Plumbing, Electrical, Mechanical, Structural, and Building Codes. Whether it is something as simple as a room addition or patio cover, or constructing a building from the ground up, the City has a friendly and expeditious building permit process.

The State of California updates the California Building Code (CBC) every three years so that building construction benefits from the most current structural and life-safety standards. The City is charged with the task of implementing the Code.

In 2008, California will adopt nationwide Codes based on the International Building Code (IBC) model. Building permit requests submitted after December 31, 2007 will need to comply with this Code. Each local jurisdiction in California must also adopt the new model Code this year, with local modifications as needed (Fairfield will adopt its new Code in October).

Tom Garcia, Fairfield's Building Official, mentioned that he has been working with other building officials in Napa and Solano Counties to develop a coordinated code for use throughout the two counties. These local codes, while based on the international model, can incorporate specific modifications reflecting unique local conditions. For example, wind load is an issue in Fairfield.

Will this new International Building Code (IBC) have any effect on the building permit process in Fairfield? Your Economic Notes reporters sat down this week with Tom Garcia to get the scoop.

Tom has been with the City of Fairfield for 26 years, so he knows the town. He is also a registered Civil Engineer, California Building Officials (CALBO) board member, and the president of the Napa-Solano ICC. He has been intimately involved with the preparation of Codes for California.

"There will be very few changes homeowners and businesses will notice with the adoption of the National Building Codes," Garcia said. "Contractors architects and engineers design and review methods will change significantly but the outcome (construction documentation) will be similar. The City's permitting process will remain the same."

While the existing UBC-based codes and the new IBC based codes are alike, there are noteworthy differences, including the Occupancy Type classifications, fire-resistance-rated construction, and fire protection systems.

We asked Mr. Garcia to provide us with a layman's example and he noted the following: dry-wall (sheet rock) in residential garages need only be 1/2" thick now, versus 5/8" under the old UBC Code. In this example, the new Code will use the least restrictive provision because it was already utilized in some parts of the country (outside California) and allows existing buildings to be in compliance.

Overall, the biggest impact of the ICC Codes will be that larger national companies will only need to design to one basic building code as they plan for new locations across the nation (and beyond). This will also simplify work for architects, engineers, and contractors, who can quickly use one new basic Code for all locations.

Still, there will be a learning curve and some quirks which need to be worked out. The biggest issue is education. For the City of Fairfield, it means getting the Building Inspectors up to speed on new code requirements and procedures. Tom Garcia has been working with his staff over the past year to provide ongoing training to smooth the transition process.

***Economic Notes** is an update from Fairfield City Hall written by Brian Miller and Karl Dumas of the Fairfield Community Development Department. They can be contacted at 428-7461 or e-mail at kdumas@ci.fairfield.ca.us or bkmiller@ci.fairfield.ca.us.*