

Building Codes: What You Should Know

If you are shopping for a new home, how can you be sure that it was built so that it does not cause health or safety problems for the members of your household?

The answer can be given in two words: building codes.

A building code sets forth requirements to protect public health, safety and general welfare as they relate to construction and the occupancy of a building. These codes include specific requirements for building materials, fire protection, structural design, light and ventilation, heating and cooling, sanitary facilities and energy conservation.

There is no national building code enforced by the federal government. Different areas of the country have different construction methods; the techniques used to build houses in a cold climate will be different than those used in a warm climate. Most construction in the United States is regulated at the local level. Only a few municipalities (mostly major cities) write and revise their own codes. Some states have mandatory statewide building codes.

Building homes is a complicated process, so building codes are often long and complicated. To prevent each local jurisdiction from having to develop its own complicated codes from scratch, there are several major model code organizations that draft codes that local areas can adopt.

The local area has total authority for adoption and enforcement. It may adopt a model code as is, adopt only specific portions, or add some of its own changes.

Code writing is a dynamic process, involving constant interaction between the public and private sectors of the construction industry. Federal, state and local governments and individuals involved in code writing and revision represent the views of labor, management, manufacturers and trade associations, contributing much time and technical expertise to the process.

Building codes do not deal with issues such as the quality of the workmanship and materials. Consumers are protected in these areas through their warranties.

For instance, if a building code inspector is examining a home and sees a gouge in a kitchen floor or countertop, that would not be an item affecting health or safety, and as such would not be covered by a building code. However, it would be covered in the warranty on workmanship and materials.