

The Inspection Process
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Each month about this time I begin formulating my next Building Official article. Over the past six months I have written about the history of building codes, when permits are required, why permits are a good idea, the Amnesty Program for undocumented construction, the steps involved in obtaining a permit and the pros and cons of hiring a contractor or doing it yourself. As I was making notes for this article, I recalled having one of the Building Inspectors stop by my office to relay a conversation he had while speaking with some contractors. Those contractors were relaying why they were reluctant to obtain permits. The gist of their concern, often reinforced by contractors looking to cut corners, revolved around the fear that once a city inspector came onto their property they would scour every nook and cranny looking for code violations. This is not the first time I have heard this justification for working without permits. So, it seems an explanation of the inspection process is both timely and appropriate.

The City of Alameda employs two Combination Building Inspectors (down from 6 three years ago), one Senior and one Supervising Building Inspector. At a minimum each inspector is certified as a 1 & 2 Family Dwelling Inspector. Most hold multiple certifications establishing their proficiency over the building, plumbing, electrical, mechanical, fire, energy and accessibility codes. As required by State law each inspector is provided 15 hours of code training per year, although most pursue additional training on their own time. All have spent many years in the construction trades before becoming inspectors and several owned their own contracting firms. Alameda's building inspectors are highly qualified and bring a wealth of construction knowledge, from both the public

and private viewpoints, to each of the 20,000 to 25,000 inspections they collectively perform annually.

In previous articles I have spoken about the importance of securing permits, equally important is having the work inspected and approved. During the permit review process, plans are checked to make sure they comply with all applicable codes. Once a permit is issued it is the responsibility of the inspector to verify that the project meets the requirements of the approved plans and minimum code. No matter how complete a set of plans are or how thorough the plan review was, none of that is of much consequence if the construction is not completed properly. It is the job of the inspector to ensure buildings are constructed to meet “the minimum requirements to safeguard the public health, safety and general welfare”.

Let's say you buy into the importance of the inspection process and now you want to know how does it work. Or You think the inspection process is just a huge pain but you still want to know how it works. In either case the code requires that “construction or work shall remain accessible and exposed for inspection purposes until approved.” Specifically, the code requires footing and foundation inspections, concrete slab and under-floor inspection, frame inspection (the frame inspection can only be completed after all rough plumbing, electrical, heating wires, pipes and ducts are approved.), lath and gypsum board inspection, energy efficiency inspections and final inspections. So prior to any of these areas being covered up the permit holder needs to call for an inspection.

In Alameda, inspections are usually performed the same day that the inspection is scheduled. Monday through Thursday, between 7:30 am and 8:30 am the contractor or

property owner can call 510 747-6830 and speak to the inspector who will be performing the inspection. Very few if any other jurisdictions provide this quick a turnaround for inspection requests. Each inspector can schedule the first AM inspection and the first PM inspection each day. Additionally, inspections can be scheduled for the morning or the afternoon. Once an inspection is scheduled it is important that someone be available at the property for the inspection. When the inspector arrives on site he will need to see the approved plans and the inspection card. Having the contractor or owner-builder available for the inspection is very helpful and can help resolve minor issues or confusion thereby reducing the need for future inspections. Upon completion of the inspection, the inspector will either provide a correction list or will sign the job card indicating the inspection passed. Within 24 hours these results will be available on line at <https://aca.accela.com/alameda/>.

The inspectors in Alameda are very talented and are dedicated to providing the best, most accurate inspections possible. Because of this I receive very few complaints about what transpires during the nearly 100 inspections they perform on a daily basis. The few complaints I do receive center on three areas of concern. The inspector searched the house for other code violations, the inspector was too nit-picky, or the inspector asked for corrections a previous inspector did not ask for. Let me touch on each of these concerns.

Inspectors, as a rule, do not go looking for code violations while performing an inspection. Inspectors focus their attention on the area covered by the permit, and more specifically on the area of the scheduled inspection. They have no interest nor do they have the time to wander through your house looking for code violations. This is not to

say that they will ignore conditions that are unsafe or an imminent hazard to life or limb. Our goal is to make sure the building is maintained in a safe manner, so it is possible that the inspector will notice the illegal two story addition being built at the back of the house while performing a sewer lateral inspection.

What some might consider nit-picky could be a serious safety hazard. The codes are written as MINIMUM standards and are continually updated and improved based on real world experiences. For instance, stair dimensions are set to avoid tripping hazards. Small variations from what is required can lead to serious safety hazards. The National Safety Council reports 12,000 stair deaths per year, with half of these deaths occurring in the home. This makes accidents from stairs second only to automobile accidents as the major cause of unintended injuries in the United States. So what may seem minor may very well be a significant safety issue.

On any given project an inspector is responsible to verify compliance with up to eight separate codes consisting of over 5,000 pages of really small text. In a fairly short period of time that inspector needs to assess the situation, review the approved plans and provide feedback on what does or does not meet code. On top of that each inspector comes to the job with a different level of expertise in the various trades. Some were plumbing contractors, others were electrical contractors and still others were general contractors. So no matter how much training we provide or how much emphasis we put on providing consistent inspections, there will be times when two inspectors see things differently. In cases where the inspectors make different calls the contractor or owner-builder is encouraged to contact the Supervising Building Inspector to work through the issue.

While inspections are vital to making sure construction projects are completed in accordance with code, they are not a substitute quality construction. It would be impossible, in the limited time available for building inspections, to check every nail, every connection, every wire, etc. The code inspection process is successful because you don't know which nail connection or wire the inspector will check. City code inspection is looking for compliance to approved plans and to minimum code requirements. It is not structured, nor does it function, as quality control for construction projects. It is so important, on any building project, to hire competent, reputable architects, engineers, designers, and contractors or be able to fulfill these roles yourself.

As always should you have questions about this or any other permit issue, you can contact us here at City Hall or by emailing me at buildingofficial@ci.alameda.ca.us. Obtaining a permit is the law, and it is also a good idea. Planning & Building staff are ready to assist you as you navigate through the review process. We are located in Room 190 on the first floor of City Hall, located at 2263 Santa Clara Avenue. Monday through Thursday we can be reached there or by phone at 510-747-6850.