



Code Holds Up in the Storm

Post-Hurricane Ike analysis determines that homes built to the windstorm standards of the IRC did well, which proves that codes work well when enforced.

Building codes are written for “international” use and they have always been an important subject of the legislative and regulatory landscape in Texas with its diverse building practices. This year is no exception, because the 81st Texas Legislative Session will unfold with Hurricane Ike still fresh on legislators’ minds, and most experts agree that the topic of enhanced building codes and tougher code enforcement will be big issues in the Capitol. Codes can be confusing, and across the state there is misunderstanding regarding where, when and how they are used. TAB members and staff play a crucial role in dispelling those misunderstandings through education and testimony in both the legislative and regulatory arenas.

Prior to 2000, there were three national building codes from which to choose for residential construction, and the state allowed municipal building departments to adopt the code of their choice. Due to this lack of uniformity, and because of concerns over vulnerable coastal construction, the Legislature in the early 90s commissioned a study of building practices along the Texas coast. The results of the study ultimately led to the development of the Texas Windstorm Insurance Association (TWIA) building code and this code was applied along the 14 Texas coastal counties. The TWIA building code stayed in effect until 2001, when the Legislature adopted the International Residential Code (IRC) as the statewide municipal residential building code.

The IRC contains specific wind provisions for all areas of the state, including wind speeds specific to Texas’ coastal areas. The establishment of the IRC as the code for Texas was in effect for three years before the 2005 hurricane season and the onslaught of Hurricane Rita. In 2007, TWIA released a study of homes affected by Hurricane Rita. The study showed that homes built to the newer building codes had far fewer claims, and that the average paid loss on those dwellings was 40 to 50 percent less than those not built with the up-to-date windstorm protections. In fact, a TWIA press release touted the study and confirmed that the windstorm requirements work.

Last year, Hurricane Ike slammed into the Texas coast and is widely seen as the third most destructive hurricane ever to make landfall in the United States. Immediately following this catastrophic event, federal, state and local agencies, including FEMA, began recovery efforts. As part of those recovery efforts, and in accordance with FEMA policy, an impact analysis of the storm was initiated. The NAHB worked hard to convince FEMA that the state and local homebuilder associations must be part of the “boots on the ground” impact analysis team. FEMA agreed to the NAHB request thereby ensuring that homebuilding professionals were able to take part in this import study to assess the effectiveness of existing building codes and standards.

The homebuilder professionals toured the areas hardest hit by Ike. The devastation was tremendous, but beyond that, they came away with from this experience with a much greater appreciation of FEMA and were truly impressed with the level with which they embraced the homebuilder’s input.

The first in a series of reports expected to be released by FEMA, HUD and the Department of Homeland Security, states that storm surge, not wind, resulted in the serious damage to structures. The report also found that homes built to the windstorm standards of the IRC did well, and is further evidence that building codes work well when enforced.

Working with FEMA to analyze disaster destruction proves that the homebuilder industry is willing to roll up its sleeves and closely examine all angles of home construction for the betterment of Texas. As the 81st Legislative Session moves toward its final day, a similar “boots on the ground” effort from TAB members will be needed to help educate our lawmakers about building codes and other homebuilding issues.

Reference: March/April 2009 Texas Builder