

Trouble-Free Building Inspections

by Rogers Belch

I still remember my first day as a new foreman, anxiously waiting for my framing inspection. I'd heard stories of jobs being shut down, so as I walked the site with the building inspector, I nervously anticipated the dreaded "red flag." I worried in vain: Not only did the flag never come, but the inspector offered suggestions that helped me throughout the job.

Of course, building inspectors are charged with safeguarding the community. Much as they would like to be helpful, their foremost concern is public safety. That said, don't forget that most building inspectors were once in our shoes. They understand how challenging our work can be and, given the opportunity, are ready to offer themselves as a resource both before the job begins and as problems arise during construction.

For this article, I asked building inspectors in Annapolis, Md., where I live and work, to talk about the issues that arise most often in both new construction and remodeling work. The list is not complete — I'm sure your local inspectors could add items that apply to your area. But inspectors everywhere will agree that following these preventive measures will not only result in a problem-free inspection, it will cement your relationship with your local building department as well.

Preconstruction Meeting

Although inspectors are busy, they can usually set aside time to visit the site before work begins. At a minimum, an advance meeting is a courtesy that

enables the inspector to become familiar with your project before construction starts. This courtesy will likely be returned in the form of genuine interest in your project and enthusiasm for its successful outcome.

Beyond courtesy, however, preconstruction meetings with your inspector also make financial sense. If you hold the meeting early enough, inspectors can take some of the guesswork out of your estimate. Code issues that you might easily overlook — properly sized egress in a basement, for example, or a sprinkler system on the third floor — will be obvious to a building inspector at first glance.

Many expensive structural issues can also be resolved by consulting with your inspector prior to construction. While inspectors will not offer design advice, they may suggest materials and methods you hadn't thought of. And this advice is not only professional, but free as well. On one project, for example, we wanted to eliminate the collar ties to create a cathedral ceiling. The inspector helped us find a way to support a structural ridge that carried the load to the foundation. This solution both reduced our engineering fees and ensured that the job passed the framing inspection.

Permits

Don't start without the proper permits. Your clients may be anxious to start, but your construction schedule should take permit lead-time into account. The temptation may be strong to begin prematurely, but it's

not worth risking your license or your reputation at the building department.

Post the Permit

Inspection departments regularly receive calls about work being done without a permit, when actually the contractor has the permit but has not posted it. This may be the number one omission and, while enforced differently across the country, can result in a fine. Consider making a "kiosk" to house your permit, inspection stickers, site address, and site drawings — your district may even require one.

Special Conditions

Be sure to check the working drawings and other paperwork for any comments added by the building department during the permit application process. Often the tendency is to get straight to work as soon as your permit is released, but missing a step can be expensive. Moving a foundation to the proper setback, for example, is your responsibility if noted by the permit department in your working drawings — and it's a lot easier to do before the foundation is in place. Also check for policy changes and notes on inspection sequence. And don't forget to look for any holidays that coincide with a planned inspection.

Site Address

In new developments where new homes are widely separated by empty lots, it's often difficult for inspectors to find your site. To help the inspector arrive at the right place at the right

time — and in a good mood — display the building address prominently. In the early phases of construction, put up a temporary plywood sign; as soon as you have some walls up, spray paint the address on the sheathing.

Follow the Sequence

Stay within the inspection sequence. Most important — and most commonly ignored — is the need to complete prerequisite work before calling for inspections. The inspector needs to see verification of prior inspections, so it's a waste of everyone's time to call for an inspection before you are ready.

On rare occasions, an inspector with a heavy work load may allow you to start your electrical rough-in, insulation, or drywall, for example, before he or she can get there. However, this kind of courtesy is usually extended only after you have established a rapport with the inspector. Don't start work out of sequence without asking the inspector, and don't jeopardize

your relationship by asking the inspector to bend the rules too often.

Change Orders

Notify your inspector of any changes in your plans that will affect the inspections. Technically, your permit is released only for the scope of work outlined in the original permit application. Change orders modify the scope of work, and may have an effect on code compliance — a window added to a stairwell, for example, may require tempered glass.

Make sure that everyone involved in making the change — including the owner and the architect, if necessary — is present at the inspection. It's especially important to make sure that someone from your company who is familiar with the job is at the site to walk through the change with the inspector. Better yet, to avoid any misunderstandings, attend the inspection yourself.

Safe Access

Make sure the inspector can easily

get to what he or she came to see. A clean, efficient, and safe site not only makes the inspector's job easier, it sends a message that you are serious about your job.

Other measures can contribute to the inspector's sense that you are conscientious about quality and safety. For example, consider leaving a first aid kit and fire extinguisher in a conspicuous location. Posting a complete project schedule is also a good way to show your inspector that you are well-organized. Finally, be sure the radio is off and that your crew holds the noise down during the walk-through. 

***Rogers Belch**, a former remodeling contractor, is construction manager for Arundel Habitat for Humanity in Annapolis, Md. Thanks to Chief Building Inspector Tom Swontek and members of the Annapolis Department of Public Works Bureau of Inspections and Permits for help with this article.*