

In the News

Austin Passes Modest “Visitability” Requirement for New Houses

Should new private homes have to be accessible to disabled visitors regardless of whether the owners themselves are disabled?

That was the question roiling Austin, Texas, city council meetings in June, after councilwoman Betty Dunkerley proposed adding sweeping “visitability” requirements to the city’s code for new houses. Austin already requires that city-sponsored housing include such accessibility features as entry ramps, 32-inch interior doors, and lever hardware. Dunkerley’s proposal made those elements a permit requirement for *any* new house.

Opposition. Builders objected that the idea was too broad and would burden private homeowners who might never have a disabled visitor — while doing nothing for disabled persons actually living in existing spaces without accessible details. And although Dunkerley had cited a \$300 construction cost figure, builders told a different tale: Greater Austin HBA vice president Harry Savio informed the council that one HBA member, production builder D.R. Horton, expected architect fees alone — for redrawing the dozens of plans Horton builds in Austin — to run as high as \$250,000.

Even supposedly modest changes like upsizing a bathroom door can have a ripple effect on an affordable house’s tight floor plan, pointed out Habitat for Humanity designer Lee Doar in a phone interview. One of her own one-story plans, for instance, has three baths — a main bathroom with a 3-foot door, plus a half bath and a powder room with 24-inch doors. The proposed rule required minimum 32-inch doors for all three. “I would have to enlarge the shower room to get the 32 inches,” said Doar. “And I would have to make the powder room even smaller, and eliminate storage or something — I haven’t figured out how I could make that work.”

Final measure. In the end, the council passed a sharply scaled-back measure requiring that one first-floor bath have a 30-inch door and be framed with wall blocking to allow future installation of grab bars. Members authorized a task force to develop a voluntary, incentive-based program incorporating the rest of the requirements in Dunkerley’s proposal.

Savio says the HBA plans to focus on the task force. “A third of our new housing already complies with the existing visitability program” because the units are supported by city incentives, he says, which has given association members a wealth of insight: “We have a lot of folks with a lot of experience who can provide stories, examples, plans, and photos.”

As for advocates for the disabled, the *Austin American-Statesman* reported that many left the final meeting disappointed. Nevertheless, the new rule marks the first time a U.S. municipality has made any accessibility features a permit requirement for private single-family homes.

— Ted Cushman

■ Centex, KB Home, Pulte Homes, and MDC Holdings — the parent company of Richmond American Homes — have been fined a total of nearly \$3.5 million for failing to prevent silt-laden runoff from 2,202 construction sites, the EPA and the Justice Department announced in June. The violations took place from 2001 to 2005 in 34 different states; California, Florida, Texas, Arizona, and Nevada had the most violations. The action against the companies is part of a nationwide effort by the EPA to prevent stormwater violations at construction sites.

■ Localities in Florida and elsewhere have begun levying fines on mortgage companies that allow repossessed homes to degrade, reports the *New York Times*. This has led to a boom in so-called mortgage service companies, which inspect, repair, and maintain the unwanted homes. One company president interviewed by the paper predicted robust growth. “We still have two million more people that need to go through this process,” she was quoted as saying. “That’s like the entire town of Tampa going through foreclosure.” The paper also notes that nearly 3 percent of previously owner-occupied homes were vacant in March, up from less than 2 percent in 2005 — the highest figure since the Census Bureau began keeping track in 1956.

In the News

Pneumatic Nailer Triggering Has Little Effect on Speed, Study Finds

A growing body of research suggests that framing and sheathing with a pneumatic nailer set to contact-trip mode is at least twice as dangerous as working with a sequentially triggered gun (see “Pneumatic Nailers Under Fire Again,” *In the News*, 7/08). Still, it’s long been an article of faith among carpenters that bump-nailing is the faster method. And a recent study of experienced carpenters in St. Louis appears to confirm that belief: Sequential nailing — which requires the user to squeeze the trigger for each individual fastener — is indeed somewhat slower. However, the overall difference in speed turns out to be surprisingly small.

In the study — summarized in the July/August issue of *Public Health Reports* — 10 journeyman carpenters, working individually, each framed and sheathed two precut hip-roofed 8-by-10-foot sheds, once with a contact-triggered nailer and once with a sequentially triggered tool. Half worked with the sequential nailer first, and half with the contact nailer first. All 20 projects were recorded on videotape, and the tape was broken down to determine how much time the participants — who had been told to work at a normal pace — actually spent nailing. (Time spent handling and positioning material was excluded.)

Analysis of the tapes showed that the mean amount of time spent nailing came to 92.8 minutes per shed for the contact-triggered tool and 103.0 minutes for the sequential-fire gun — a 10 percent difference in favor of bump-nailing. But when layout, cutting, and handling time were included, the disparity fell to 0.77 percent of the mean 1,298 minutes spent on each shed.

Although all of the participants were experienced residential carpenters, there was a substantial difference in speed from one individual to the next. Sequential- and contact-trigger nailing times for three of the 10, for example, varied by less than three minutes, while the times of three others varied by 20 minutes or more. So how much of that variability was due to the type of nailer used and how much to the carpenters themselves? After conducting a statistical analysis, the study’s authors concluded that slightly more than two-thirds of the variability in

speed could be attributed to differences among carpenters and one-third to other factors, including trigger type. In other words, speed of nailing seems to depend less on the tool used than on the person using it.

Finally, the researchers also found that the type of nailer had little effect on the quantity of nails used, which ranged from 1,022 to 1,368 per shed. Missed nail placements for the two trials were also quite close, with a mean of 25 misses per shed assembled with contact nailers, and 22 per shed nailed with sequential-trip tools. As you might expect, though, practice did make a difference, with carpenters using a mean of 30 more nails to assemble their first shed than their second, regardless of trigger type. — *Jon Vara*

■ A roofing crew using a torch to soften asphalt shingles was responsible for a costly Memorial Day fire at Hollywood’s Universal Studios, according to *The Associated Press*. The 12-hour blaze destroyed two blocks of a faux New York brownstone streetscape, as well as the studio’s King Kong attraction and the courthouse square from the 1985 hit movie *Back to the Future*.

■ How do you move a lot of unsold houses fast? Michael Crews Development, a San Diego-based residential builder, is taking an approach more commonly associated with pizza or fast-food sales: Buyers of one of the company’s \$1.6 to \$1.8 million “estate homes” in an Escondido gated community will receive a second house (valued at \$399,900, according to the company) in a nearby townhouse development free. Breadsticks and a large soda apparently are not included.

■ Bosch has announced the recall of 9,700 half-inch hammer drills because of a defective trigger: The drill may continue to operate after the trigger’s released. The model 1191VSR hammer drills were sold nationwide from July 2007 through April 2008. For more information, contact Bosch Tools at 877/472-0007 or go to boschtools.com.