

## Readers Comment on “Building Codes and Red Tape” (September/October 2013)

### More Cooperation Needed

When bidding recently to replace an existing second-story deck, I noted that the deck’s framing and supports were less than adequate and that the concrete footings were undersized. I explained to the customer that the city would probably require a P.E. to sign off on the plans to cover the footings and lateral attachment to the house, which would add about \$400 to the cost of the project. When I double-checked our city’s requirements, however, I discovered that while it didn’t need a P.E. to sign off on our plans, it did want a soils engineer to check on the soils ... for a 25+ year-old house.

In our area, we routinely build house additions without any need for a soils report, so this requirement—which isn’t enforced by any of the other cities or counties I work in—was a complete surprise. But when I questioned the building official about this “unique” interpretation of our state’s building code, his comment to me was, “Did you come to complain? Or seek a solution?”

Unfortunately, when code problems like this crop up, contractors—not the code officials—are usually the ones who have to report the bad news to the customers. We’re also the ones who hear their immediate feedback, not the city.

And if I fight too hard for one customer, the repercussions can affect my ability to get permits for future customers. In this case, we didn’t build the deck, and I’m not sure the customer ever found someone to do the job.

I’ve long been an advocate for permits, but lately it seems that the helpful building officials who wanted to problem-solve with me have been replaced by those who are more likely to dictate the letter of the law.

**John Robinson**

Quality Residential Construction  
Albany, Ore.

### Too Much Engineering?

When there’s even just the slightest slope in a job that we’re bidding, we go ahead and inform our customers that there will be an additional \$700 charge for geotechnical engineering. In most cases, this involves about five minutes of work ... literally: a glance down the hole, and a “yes” or a “no.” It doesn’t take long before the technician or engineer is finished looking, gets in his company vehicle, and drives off to his next inspection.

We almost cheer out loud when we find out that a customer resides in a hassle-free area, where we don’t have to jump through too many zoning hoops.

My husband was at a variance meeting recently with one of our customers to argue that they should be allowed to have a deck or porch at their front door. This would be a simple 12-by-14-foot rectangular wood deck with a wood railing. So far, it’s cost \$250 for

the application fee (with no guarantee it will be approved) and \$500 for the surveyor (because the zoning department couldn’t locate a plot plan, not even on microfiche). I will honestly be surprised if it results in a yes.

**Tara**

(from Comments section at  
deckmagazine.com)  
Thomas Decks

### Better Communication

As a Realtor for 28 years, a developer of small plats, and a salesperson for many new and existing homes, I have seen myriad interpretations and applications by plan reviewers and site inspectors for the same building code requirements. As a result, many owners and contractors are skirting codes and the inspection process altogether.

Some building officials seem to believe that it is their job to interpret the building code, not just enforce it, and many of them change their minds several

times during a construction project. We also encounter officials who believe the approval process must be a series of events that occur in a specific order—if you don’t do “A” first, there is no need to look at “B” or “C.” We used to be able to sit down together and discuss all the project components, share how each part interacts and coordinates, and get over-all approvals subject to some changes, which allowed us to plan and schedule projects more efficiently. Now, it seems that many code authorities only think

individually and of the part that concerns them at that moment.

**Ron Young**

Bellingham, Wash.

**We want your two cents.**

E-mail us at [prodeck@](mailto:prodeck@hanleywood.com)

[hanleywood.com](http://hanleywood.com) or mail letters to:  
Professional Deck Builder, 186 Allen  
Brook Lane, Williston, VT 05495