BUILDING CODES TOOLKIT

Frequently Asked Questions

Purpose: These frequently asked questions are meant to address common concerns of property owners related to building codes, compliance, process, and available tools for supporting proper construction decisions.

Target User: Property owners.

1. What are building codes?

Building codes are sets of regulations governing the design, construction, alteration, and maintenance of structures. They specify the minimum requirements to adequately safeguard the health, safety, and welfare of building occupants.

2. Why are building codes important and why should I care?

The adoption and enforcement of up-to-date building codes in new construction practices mitigates the risk of life and property loss from natural hazards and their effects. Evaluating older buildings and retrofitting structural and non-structural components will further reduce property loss and overall community risk. An understanding of local building code requirements is critical prior to executing any construction project.

3. Who develops the building codes and what are the different types?

Rather than create and maintain their own codes, most states and local jurisdictions adopt the model building codes maintained by the International Code Council (ICC) and amend them where needed prior to adoption. The ICC's family of International Codes includes:

- International Building Code (IBC): Applies to almost all types of new buildings and some existing buildings.
- International Residential Code (IRC): Applies to new one- and two-family dwellings and townhouses of not more than three stories in height.
- International Existing Building Code (IEBC): Applies to the alteration, repair, addition, or change in occupancy of existing structures.

The ICC publishes new editions of the International Codes every three years, and many states and localities have adopted them since the first editions were issued in 2000. In 2000, the three regionally-based model code organizations (BOCA National Code, SBCCI Standard Code, and ICBO Uniform Code) combined together to form the ICC.

4. How are building codes adopted?

Adoption of building codes is a local responsibility. This is generally initiated and accomplished by the State and/or local jurisdiction through a legislative and public policy process. Today, adoption of the building codes is uneven across and within States, even in areas with high levels of hazard (i.e. earthquake, flooding, hurricanes, tornado, etc.). For instance, some States in the New Madrid Seismic Zone (NMSZ) located in Central U.S. and local jurisdictions at risk of earthquakes have adopted the building codes but have made amendments or exclusions relating to the seismic provisions. Other jurisdictions have also been slow to adopt the latest code editions.

5. Who is responsible for enforcing building codes?

Local building officials are responsible for adopting and enforcing the latest building codes within a jurisdiction. Building code enforcement is achieved through the review of design plans, inspecting construction work, and issuing building and occupancy permits.

Did You Know?

According to the National Flood Insurance Program (NFIP) floods are the #1 most common natural disaster in the United States and people outside of high-risk areas file over 20% of NFIP claims and receive one-third of disaster assistance for flooding. For flood insurance and building code requirements, please visit FEMA Building Science Branch's Building Codes Resources on FEMA.gov.

Photo Source: FEMA Best Practice Portfolio.

Shenendehowa High School teacher discusses mitigation ideas with students at model home site.

For tips to protect yourself and your home, refer to "Safety First-Disaster Preparedness" a brochure published by ICC. To purchase this and all other ICC products, please visit www.iccsafe.org.

6. Who is responsible for carrying out the building codes?

The adoption and enforcement of building codes by local building officials is not enough to create disaster resilient communities. It is the responsibility of the designer and/or general contractor to ensure they incorporate the latest building codes in their plans and do not cut corners. Ultimately, it is the responsibility of the designer and/or general contractor to ensure that buildings and their occupants benefit from the positive effects of building to code and decreasing the impact of natural disaster.

7. What codes are enforced by my jurisdiction?

Building codes are dependent upon the jurisdiction in which you live. Please contact your local building and/or planning department in order to find out what building codes are enforced by your local jurisdiction.

8. How can I properly start a construction or retrofit project (i.e. new building, rehabilitation, expansion, etc.) compliant with my local building code requirements?

Please see the *Basic Checklist to Acquire a Building Permit* and *Checklist of Questions to Ask Your General Contractor* for more detailed information.

9. I have an old property; does this mean my property is not building code compliant?

Except in certain circumstances, such as when a building is significantly renovated or altered or there is a change in its use that triggers an upgrade by IBC or IEBC, the code requirements for existing buildings are those that were in effect when the structure was designed and constructed. Most existing buildings do not meet the current standards for new construction, just by virtue of their age. Nevertheless, they are not necessarily legally out of compliance because the code and the law do not require obsolete buildings to be improved whenever the code evolves.

10. I have an old property; how can I make my property safer and stronger?

The first step to making an old property safer and stronger is to consult your local emergency management agency or permitting official to gain insight and understanding of the local hazards and risks, site characteristics, and the proposed improvements. Additionally, your local building department may be able to provide you basic information about the items that are typically included in a retrofit for a building of a certain era; however, a general contractor, architect, and/or engineer will need to inspect the property in order to make specific recommendations. Please note that the recommendations you receive can vary depending on the year in which your property was built, the jurisdiction that you live in, and the hazards/risks in your community.

For more information, please:

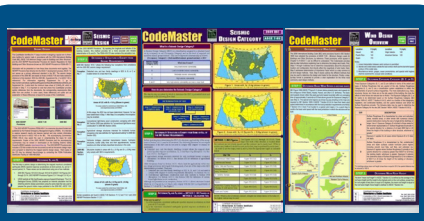
- Refer to the FEMA Guidance catalogued in our *Other Useful Resources* section of the Building Codes Toolkit
- Visit the FEMA Building Science Publication website where you will find links to publications and resources as they relate by hazard type
- Call FEMA Building Science Helpline: (866) 927-2104 or email FEMA-Buildingsciencehelp@fema.dhs.gov
- Call International Code Council Call Center: (888) 422-7233 and press 0 or email CareCenter@iccsafe.org

11. Are there available grants or financial assistance in making my property code compliant?

Consult your local building, grants department, or housing authorities for financial assistance. Also, check the following websites for other potential assistance:

- *http://www.fema.gov/grants*
- *http://www.disasterassistance.gov/*
- *http://www.benefits.gov*
- *http://www.sba.gov/content/disaster-loan-program*

Select an architect or general contractor that knows these codes, your local jurisdictions, and can appropriately safeguard you and your property. Visit www.iccsafe.org to purchase all International Code Council products and www.nfpa.org to purchase the latest National Fire Protection products.



CodeMasters are handy reference tools that contain everything your design professional needs to know about the determination of seismic, wind, and flood resistant design criteria. Visit www.iccsafe.org to purchase the latest CodeMasters.

Did You Know?

FEMA's Hazard Mitigation Assistance (HMA) grant programs provide funding for eligible mitigation activities that reduce disaster losses and protect life and property from future disaster damages. Visit FEMA Hazard Mitigation grant page for more information.

12. Where can I find more information about building codes and proper construction standards?

- Consult your local code official or building/planning department.

- FEMA
  - FEMA Building Codes & Technical Publications: *http://www.fema.gov/building-science-publications*
  - FEMA Building Science Protecting Homes: *http://www.fema.gov/protecting-homes*
  - FEMA Earthquake Publications: *http://www.fema.gov/earthquake-publications*
  - FEMA Earthquake-Building Codes: *http://www.fema.gov/earthquake-site-index/building-codes*
  - FEMA Helpline: *BuildingScienceHelp@fema.dhs.gov*
  - FEMA Publications Warehouse: To order hard copies of FEMA Publications, call 1-800-480-2520 or email *fema-publication-warehouse@fema.dhs.gov*. You must know the specific document number of the publication you are inquiring about and always request the most recent version of the publication when ordering from the warehouse.
  - FEMA Ready.gov: *http://www.ready.gov*

- International Code Council: *http://www.iccsafe.org*
  - International Building Code: *http://shop.iccsafe.org/2012-international-building-code-1.html*
  - International Residential Code: *http://shop.iccsafe.org/2012-ircr-code-and-commentary-combo-vol-1-3.html*
  - International Existing Residential Building Code: *http://shop.iccsafe.org/2012-international-existing-building-code-1.html*

- American Society of Civil Engineers: *http://www.asce.org/codes-standards/*

- Earthquake Engineering Research Institute: *http://eeri.org*

- Federal Alliance For Safe Homes: *http://www.flash.org*

- Insurance Institute for Business and Home Safety: *http://www.disastersafety.org*

- National Association of Home Builders: *http://www.nahb.org/*

Notes: