

# Guest editorial: Why update our building code?

*Daily Herald* 6 November 2015

Houses and buildings last 50 to 100 years, so how we build them is important. Spending a little more to build them stronger and more energy efficient can save owners and residents thousands of dollars over the life of a building, and reduce pollution.

Building codes are the rules contractors have to follow when they build a structure. Building code updates ensure all builders follow best practices and incorporate new technology to save owners money in the long run, and dramatically reduce pollution caused by heating homes and generating electricity for their use.

Legislators redo Utah's building code every three years, and it is now time for them to update the old, heavily amended, crazy-quilt 2012 building code to lock in benefits of the 2015 update for our houses and buildings.

An important part of the building code is the section that pertains to energy, known as the International Energy Conservation Code (IECC). It requires high standards of insulation, windows, doors, air ducts and fittings.

Of course, these improvements cost a little more, and some home builders understandably worry about that.

To find out the economic impact of adopting the 2015 IECC here in Utah, the Governor's Office of Energy Development commissioned the Pacific Northwest National Laboratory to conduct an independent analysis. Experts there calculated the 2015 energy code would save the average new Utah homeowner almost \$300 per year.

Even better, this same analysis reports the 2015 IECC would result in "positive cash flow" for new homebuyers within two years. That means that in only two years, their house payment plus utility costs would be less for a home upgraded to the 2015 IECC than it would be for a house built to our old 2012 code. That is really fast payback.

So are Utahns willing to pay a little more for a house that will have lower utility bills and help them save money over time? The vast majority say that they are. A recent statewide survey conducted by Envision Utah found that 91 percent of Utahns are willing to pay more for homes that save energy and pollute less.

Speaking of pollution, how much of it comes from our houses and buildings? In Utah County, homes and commercial structures emit about 40 percent of our total air pollution.

It is true that vehicles now cause more air problems — almost 60 percent of the total — but that figure is predicted to shrink as new vehicles become cleaner and more efficient to comply with federal standards, and as Tier 3 (lower sulfur) gasoline is phased in and we all begin to use it.

This means homes and buildings will become the primary source of pollution — roughly 60 percent by 2050 — unless policies like updated energy codes are adopted,

Adoption of the 2015 IECC, however, would by 2050 reduce Utah's most harmful emissions by 1,502 tons, dramatically reducing both PM 2.5 and ozone pollution. And it would reduce CO2 pollution by 5.5 million tons, the equivalent of taking more than 84,000 cars off the road every year.

Even though national maximum standards for PM 2.5 and ozone exist, physicians tell us no safe level exists for either, especially for the 8 percent of Utah children with asthma.

Unquestionably, incorporating energy-efficient and cleaner technologies during construction is far more cost effective than trying to retrofit a home later.

Some builders and developers complain their customers are often unwilling to spend more for long-range benefits that are not clear to them. That is understandable. Who would spend more for a fuel-efficient car with no sticker on the window saying exactly how many miles per gallon the car will get? And that is also a good reason why all new homes should have some sort of energy rating as well.

Last year Rep. Craig Powell's bill to require an energy rating for new structures was not adopted, but the Utah Association of Realtors agreed to include a field in the Multiple Listing Service (MLS) of homes for sale that would give prospective buyers and sellers the ability to post and receive such ratings as part of the advertising process.

It's not on the MLS yet, but this is something all home buyers should insist on.

While we are on the subject of what average people can do, let's encourage our legislators to vote for an update of the Utah building code that is as good as the 2015 International Energy Conservation Code, or better.

The Business and Labor Interim Committee is now considering what it will recommend regarding the energy code, and the full Legislature will consider an energy code update during the 2016 general session beginning in January.

*Don Jarvis is chair of the Provo City Sustainability and Natural Resources Committee. His opinions do not necessarily reflect city policy.*