

Building Code Overview

Building codes have been in place in one form or another for about 4,000 years. The earliest building codes did not set construction standards, but instead set punishments for shoddy building construction. This included the requirement that if a building collapsed and killed someone; the builder of that building would be executed.

Modern building codes were generally developed in response to disasters. Whether the disaster was natural (earthquake, etc.) or man-made (fire), codes were introduced to mitigate the severity of death and destruction from future disasters. As early as the 1600's, building codes specifically addressed the spread of fire by requiring fire separation walls, adequate space between buildings, and prohibiting specific building materials.

By the 1800's, building codes had started to introduce requirements for light and ventilation in order to make the dense tenement construction in cities livable.

Building codes today are amended on a regular basis to reflect new building technology, new materials, and changes in the population. All building codes draw their authority from the "police power" of the State to ensure for the health, welfare, and safety of its citizens.

In general, building codes today can be broken down into five general categories.

1. **Structural integrity.** Thanks for modern building codes and design, very few buildings suffer structural failure anymore. The majority of recent structural failures (some with numerous fatalities) are found in accessory construction (decks, porches, etc.), and in most cases these items were either not built to code, or were modified/repared without following code requirements.
2. **Accessibility.** As the population ages, and as the nation has become more aware of the difficulties that disabled persons have on a day-to-day basis, codes have been adopted to provide for universal accessibility to many buildings. These codes include the Americans with Disability Act (ADA) and the Illinois Accessibility Code. The City of Peoria is obligated to enforce these codes, but does not have the authority to amend them.
3. **Energy Efficiency.** The introduction of energy codes is designed to reduce the life-cycle (long term) cost of building ownership by reducing ongoing gas and electric costs. Energy efficiency regulations can cause a higher first-cost, which is generally included in the purchase price of a property. This first-cost is "paid back" by the energy cost savings over the life of the building. In Illinois, the Energy Code is a required construction code.
4. **General Health.** This is a general category that would cover items such as correct plumbing connections, walls that are constructed to not allow internal moisture build-up, and other items that could cause general health issues for the occupants of the building.
5. **Fire and Escape.** Most of the provisions in building codes related to fire. This should not be surprising, as history has shown that fire is the most damaging and deadly issue that an individual building owner, or an entire community can face. Building codes cannot prevent all fires. However, there are far fewer fires associated with construction today than there were a decade ago, or a decade before that. More importantly, there are far fewer deaths because of building fires today than in the past. Building codes have four main roles when it comes to fire. First, prevent the fire from happening in the first place. Second, stop or slow the spread of fire if it does happen. Third, alert persons in and around the building that a fire has started. Fourth, provide for a clear and open path of escape for persons in a building that is on fire. Fire professionals will testify that the difference between having two minutes to exit a burning building and having five minutes can be the difference between life and death.

Building codes go unnoticed by the majority of the population because they work so well. If buildings were collapsing or catching on fire on a regular basis, there would be far more focus on the quality of building codes and construction. As this is not happening, it can be easy to dismiss codes as unnecessary and obsolete. Instead, building codes are one of the great public successes of the past few centuries, as they provide safe and secure structures for work, recreation, and family.