

Norfolk Insider

City of Norfolk, NE

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“The Need for Inspections”



A lot of time, effort and money is put into the construction of a new home, business or remodeling project. Duane Gall is part of a team in Norfolk that assures the structure will be safe and viable for years to come. In November alone he inspected 110 building projects in the Norfolk area.

Gall works for the City of Norfolk Prevention Bureau as a plumbing and mechanical inspector. Steve Nordhues is the building official, Willie Nelson is the electrical inspector, Terry Zwiebel is the Fire Marshal, Trent Howard is the Prevention Officer, and John Kouba is the Health Official. Bev Vonderohe is the bureau's Secretary. Scott Cordes serves as an Asst. Fire Chief/Manager of the Prevention Bureau. The Prevention Bureau is part of the City's Fire Department.

Their primary job is to enforce minimum code standards in new or remodeled construction-residential or commercial. They also assist in property maintenance inspection like rental units, apartments or houses when there is a conflict as to the condition of the property.

They go by the book – the book of International Codes which states the minimum accepted standard in new construction throughout the country. Members of the general public, contractors, code experts and others have developed the standard that is continually reviewed and changed as new products are used and research shows what safety

measures are warranted. Every three years, the new set of code standards are presented to the building industry. It makes for heavy reading. There are separate thick manuals for fire, electrical, plumbing, mechanical, building, and property maintenance codes. After the new international codes are introduced, local officials and contractors review them and then present them to be approved by the city council. The whole review and adoption process may take up to a year and a half.

In some years there aren't a lot of changes made to the international code and in other years there are significant changes. Gall said that in 2006, there were codes adopted that actually relaxed some requirements. Most years, the standards are made a bit more stringent.

“The 100% reason for having codes is safety, durability and longevity. The City of Norfolk can make amendments to the code locally to some degree but we have to maintain the intent of the code. For instance, a code that makes sense in a large urban city might not apply here. Safety is always our goal. The mass destruction of buildings in

Haiti and China demonstrate what happens to structures that aren't properly inspected and are of shoddy workmanship," Gall said.

The reasoning behind most of the codes is understandable. Anyone knows that there shouldn't be bare electrical wires running through an attic. The reason for other codes isn't so clear. Why would there be a code that states how many outlets should be in a kitchen? Because there have been many fires and injuries caused by people tripping over and pulling down extension cords and electrical devices in the kitchen.

If wall studs are improperly placed, a structure can fall. If an electrical circuit is overloaded, fire is a real possibility. An improperly installed water pipe can leak and cause permanent damage to a building.

Gall said contractors and builders in the Norfolk community are diligent about making sure construction is sound and are diligent in following code standards. Still, a builder may occasionally have to move an outlet or make other adjustments after the city code staff have inspected a project.

"It's never a good thing to have someone tell you that you have to spend money where you didn't know you had to. Fortunately, we have a group of quality contractors in this area. We all want the same thing- a quality project that's safe and something we can be proud of and the community can be proud of," Gall said.

The codes department works with contractors and builders before a project is even started to make sure everything will be done correctly.

"People can bring their plans in here and we'll review the plans with them which may prevent them from making mistakes that would prove costly later," Gall said.

Recently elected city council member Shane Clausen, co-owner of Clausen Brothers Construction, knows all about what it's like to follow code standards.

"The codes are out there to protect the user by making sure the builder isn't cutting corners. We comply with the code. It's part of my job. A great thing the city provides is that if you bring in a set of plans they'll sit down with you and will make suggestions. There are terrific cost savings when you have to rework a plan only once," Clausen said.

Cordes, who has recently taken on additional duties as Shane Weidner serves in his new role as Interim City Administrator, said the city is always willing to work with builders and contractors.

"Our goal is to help projects along, not hold them up. The more we can help the contractor up front the better the process. It takes good communication," Cordes said.

The codes department is located in the south end of the Fire Department building and is open Monday through Friday from 7 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. The municipal code can be accessed on the city website at <http://www.ci.norfolk.ne.us/citycode> where it can be searched by keyword, Table of Contents or by section. A printed version is available at the library or at the city clerk's office. A complete copy of the city code can also be purchased at the city clerk's office.