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Outdated building codes could be dangerous: Guest Voice of Pete Albaugh

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BY PETE ALBAUGH
Contributing writer



My first car, a 1964 Chevy, didn't have any seat belts installed at the factory. The most recent automobile I purchased has many safety features that were not even thought of when I started driving. Auto manufacturers now make better, safer cars and still make money. Why can't we do that with buildings?

I joined the volunteer fire department in 1973. I've been to more than 400 fires, of varying degrees of loss, and I've seen the damage that can result in buildings with outdated safety standards. The sad reality is that Pennsylvania has stopped regular updates of its building codes, which set minimum standards for building safety and durability.

Every three years, Pennsylvania's Uniform Construction Code Review and Advisory Council evaluates proposed revisions to building codes and decides whether the state will update its codes. In 2012, the RAC decided not to update the codes – opting out of vital safety and energy-saving improvements to building practices. The RAC was able to get away with this because it is dominated by builders who care more about their profits than protecting the people who live and work in the buildings they make, or the firefighters like me who risk their lives saving the lives and property of others.

As a firefighter, too often I've arrived at a burning house to find the floor collapsing into the basement, a situation that's dangerous and hinders our efforts to safely put out a fire. Updating building codes will include provisions that increase safety for both residents and the firefighters.

We are learning more every day about how to build homes and other buildings in a way that keeps our families safe and saves money. The newest and best building codes have a wide variety of advantages. They keep costs and safety risks lower, and ultimately, make the buildings constructed with better codes better, safer places to live and do business.

For example, there are many energy-saving advantages of new building codes that can save residents plenty of money, such as more insulation, better windows, and more efficient lighting. An analysis by the Building Codes Assistance Project found that a home in Pennsylvania constructed to the latest codes would save its residents between \$7,623 and \$19,191 on energy over the life of a 30-year mortgage. That's a significant savings that can either stay in your wallet or be wasted on higher utility bills.

Plus, buildings constructed to the latest standards stand up better to natural disasters and cost less to insure. Many Pennsylvanians saw their flood insurance skyrocket after Superstorm Sandy. A recent Federal Emergency Management Agency investigation into post-disaster recovery efforts found that the money savings for owners of code-compliant buildings through lower insurance rates and by avoiding damage from flood, wind and other disasters would vastly outweigh the relatively small additional cost of building to updated codes from the start. FEMA concluded: "Updated building safety codes are one of the most cost-effective means of reducing damage from natural disasters," and that for every \$1 spent in constructing to the most up-to-date codes, we'll save \$4 in rebuilding costs.

The new code review cycle started in June, and the RAC has 12 months to evaluate thousands of code changes. At its last meeting, the RAC acknowledged that it could not review the codes in accordance with the current law. Even more surprising, the RAC recently decided not to even try. It will not even start its review process until September, wasting four precious months. This pointless delay shows that the RAC is acting in bad faith – it does not intend to review the codes at all.

State lawmakers have an opportunity to develop and pass legislation that would remove some of the politics of the code adoption process and get new codes adopted. It is incumbent upon lawmakers to address the issue now because the RAC has clearly demonstrated that it is in no hurry to review codes under the existing system.

Until building codes are updated, our state is doing a disservice to residents and firefighters alike. Let's not let this gross negligence continue. Pennsylvanians deserve better, and safer, buildings.

PETE ALBAUGH is a veteran volunteer firefighter and fire marshal of Summit Township in Crawford County. For information about building codes and energy efficiency, visit www.pennfuture.org.

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