



# FEMA

## 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](#).*



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

Photo Source: FEMA Best Practice Portfolio.

*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](http://www.iccsafe.org).*



