

## Architects think building code should be altered



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By Caroline Simson

In an emergency situation when a rescue is needed, the last thing a homeowner wants is for emergency personnel to be unable to easily reach family members. But according to the American Institute of Architects Peconic Chapter, one section of New York's building code makes that not only possible but likely.

In a series of letters to the editor published in The Press and similar letters sent to a state subcommittee working on the building code, members of the AIA Peconic ask that the code be revised in several ways to ensure

that the protection of people—not the protection of interiors and property, as is stated in the code—be its first priority.

According to Stephen Lesser, chairman of the codes committee for AIA Peconic, the code changes his group is requesting stem from a designation in the code that creates a 230-mph wind zone designation, which includes the entire East End. The special designation brings into play a number of requirements, including the installation of pressure-tested windows that can withstand the impact of objects that may be caught up by wind and turned into projectiles during a storm.

"The reason you strengthen windows is so that when [an object] hits them, it doesn't break the window," said Mr. Lesser during a recent interview. "But you can protect windows in other ways."

He noted that some of the other methods of protecting windows during windstorms include putting panels of plywood or shutters over the glass. "There's very little evidence that the strengthening of windows protects people inside ... The code is not to protect people, it's to protect the interiors," he said, adding that the preface to the building code states that its purpose is just the opposite—protecting interiors, not people.

The problem with strengthened windows, he said, is that fire departments waste time breaking them to get inside because a special diamond chain saw is needed to cut through. In addition, strengthened windows have the same appearance as regular windows, making it difficult at first glance for firefighters to tell which tool they will need to get inside.

“When they arrive at a fire with strengthened windows, it can be a disaster,” Mr. Lesser said. In fact, he added, the windows are so strong that in ballistics test the wall of a structure will often give out before the strengthened glass is shattered.

“The firemen may not be able to know which of these windows are the stronger version,” said Ian McDonald, a current board member and past president of AIA Peconic. “Only new additions [to a home] have this, or new construction. Firemen don’t know which one they’re up against.”

Though the code is not due to be updated until 2012, Mr. Lesser said that he and other members of AIA Peconic have been trying to encourage the state to address the matter now, because it’s an issue they feel strongly about.

Mr. Lesser explained that another alternative to strengthened windows is a house constructed with a partially enclosed design, which means that a building is designed that so that the walls and floors will remain intact when a storm hits. However, the openings of the home—the doors and windows—are not secured. It’s a design that gives people a safe structure where they can shelter themselves, but also allows rescuers easy access to the interior, according to Mr. Lesser.

Despite the fact that this type of partially enclosed design is included in the building code, Mr. Lesser explained that the strengthened windows are still required—which he maintains is due to the fact that window manufacturers were present while the code was being discussed.

In addition to safety, Mr. Lesser said that he and the other members of the AIA Peconic believe that the classification is somewhat arbitrary, in that all East End areas are included.

“The zone’s been applied whether or not it’s oceanfront, bayfront, in the woods, or elsewhere,” said Mr. McDonald. “There’s no selection process. We’re asking them to readdress and partition it, and to apply it less uniformly.”

Nevertheless, despite the architects’ concerns, at least one local government official said that firefighters have been trained to deal with strengthened windows and that their hands are, for the most part, tied.

“It’s New York State building code—there’s nothing we can do about it,” said Cheryl Kraft, the chief fire marshal and public safety administrator for Southampton Town. She noted that when the code was first enacted in 2003, the county’s Fire Rescue and Emergency Services department held training sessions to ensure that firefighters had the necessary skills to break strengthened windows.

Mr. Lesser vowed that he and his colleagues will continue in their campaign to change the code.

“We intend to not go away,” he said. “We shouldn’t be trapping people in houses with strengthened glass. This stuff is going to kill somebody someday.”