

Notes From the Commish

By: Curtis Meskus, Building Commissioner/Zoning Enforcement Officer
building.zeo@townofcharlton.net

This column and future columns (I hope), will be informative and useful to those who intend to construct, or do work on structures in the Town of Charlton. While at times, the process of obtaining permission to start a building project seems to be an exercise in bureaucratic red tape, it is the function of the Building Department along with other Boards and Commission in the Town of Charlton to ensure compliance with the various regulations each is charged with by the laws and regulations of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts.

In this article we will outline the primary function of the Building Commissioner's Office and the basic reason for the building code. Future articles will deal with specific building projects and Town of Charlton Zoning Bylaws, as those requirements relate to the process and erection of new structures or the additions to existing properties.

While to some it may seem the primary job of the office is to review applications and issue permits, (or collect money and be a stumbling block to your project). The true mission is to enforce the rules of the Massachusetts Building Code (780 CMR), and along with this goal ensure public safety. This is accomplished by the prevention of building system failure, by diligent plan review coupled with inspections to uncover and correct errors before they become safety issues for the users of the structures. 780 CMR section 101.4 states;

780 CMR shall be constructed to secure its expressed intent, which is to insure public safety, health and welfare insofar as the are affected by building construction, through structural strength, adequate means of egress facilities, sanitary conditions, light and ventilation, energy conservation and fire safety; and, in general, to secure safety to life and property from all hazard incident to the design, construction, reconstruction, alteration, repair, demolition, removal, use or occupancy of building, structures or premises.

Yes, the members of this office read from and interpret sections like the one above, every day, in an eight hundred pages plus tome. To do this the members of the Building Commissioner's office need to have knowledge and training of the codes. We attend numerous seminars and meetings with other code officials, to learn about the current code and changes, along with how others interpret the codes. Through this training Curtis Meskus the Building Commissioner has obtained certification as an Inspector of Buildings/Building Commissioner on the national and state level, and Tony Zahariadis who is working as a Local Inspector is working toward his certification as a Local Inspector.

Factors that have major influence in the construction of buildings are; the use of the building and the materials it is constructed with. The uses are divided into groups, which are based on the relative mobility and alertness of the occupants. In a Business or Factory use group, it is expected that the occupants are familiar with the exits and will be awake and alert at all times, compared to a Residential use group, which includes hotel and motels, in which the occupants can be transient and maybe asleep or impaired at the time of the emergency and therefore need sufficient warning, additional protection and time to evacuate the building.

At this point the question most asked of the Building Commissioner is, "When is a permit required?" can be answered. A building permit is required for the demolition of an existing building or structure. Along with any work that involves erection of a new structure regardless of size, or the remodeling and changes to existing structures, including interior nonstructural changes (yes this includes finishing your basement or attic); if a tradesman would be required to pull a permit for their work; electrical or plumbing work for example, work that affects the energy envelope, new or replacement of door(s) or window(s), siding and roofing. A building permit is also required for; new swimming pools both in-ground and above-ground, fences six feet and over in height, retaining walls over four feet in height, porches, sunrooms and decks. All of these items have

safety related requirements spelled out in the codes, and proper permitting and inspection can assure compliance with these codes.

Once an understanding of the appropriate requirements of the code is reached, all based on the main purposes of the code, which is safety from structural failure, personal health and safety during fire or other emergencies, the evaluation of the project can begin. To initiate the evaluation process an application is submitted for review. In the application and plans is information about the; use, size, shape, structural members, windows, doors along with the configuration of the proposed building or structure. The proposed configuration of the structure is then compared to the prescriptive or performance requirements of the building code to see if the minimums are met or exceeded.

Some of the criteria looked at include; the depth and size of the foundation, are the wall, floor and roof members sufficient for the loads imposed, do the windows and doors allow for light, ventilation and egress in case of emergency, are sanitary, cooking and bathing facilities provide if required? If all the needed structural elements are of suffice size or shape and, if all other requirements are meet, permission by the issuance of a building permit can be given for your project.

During the construction process, inspections are performed at certain points of the project, before work is allowed to continue. For most buildings there is an inspection of the foundation before it is backfilled, an inspection of the framing after the plumbing and electrical rough-in have been signed off by the respective inspectors, an inspection to verify insulation has been properly installed before wall and ceiling coverings are applied and finally after all work has been completed to allow occupancy of the structure. If problem(s) are found, reinspections maybe required, or due to the complexity of the project additional inspections can be required by the building official.

A companion part of the process is zoning requirements, which will be addressed in a future article.