



Late Backup

ADAPT supports Visitability standards in the Building Code for new Single Family (non-multifamily) construction.

- **Uniform** requirements will make it easier to comply.
- If requirements are in building code, the **requirements will be easier to find**.
- Builders using City assistance have **successfully complied with similar requirements for over 15 years**, less than a dozen variances were necessary during those 15 years.
- The builders who have been **complying** for over 15 years have been **building affordable housing**, which:
 - Has more constraints than market rate housing
 - Has smaller cost margins (less overall money to work with)
 - Is often built on more difficult terrain
- It is **unfair to hold builders of affordable housing to a higher standard** than those building at market rate, which has higher profits.
- The first owner of a home is rarely the last owner of a home, and providing a basic level of access, a shell, will allow for later use by more people, owners and visitors.

We **support the no step entrance requirement** and no step threshold. All of our homes have no step entrances and we have not found any problems with them.

We do not understand why the requirements for **accessible light switches**, receptacles, and other environmental controls are only for the VISIBLE bathrooms. We think this should be **required throughout the first floor, or at least along the VISIBLE route**.

We **do not support a fee in lieu** of approach. Fees are never enough to provide equivalent opportunities for Visitability or access and do not serve as deterrents from avoiding access. This hasn't worked well for affordable housing and it won't work well for access.

We **don't support weakening the waiver provision** as it has worked so far. The accessible entrance can be **any** entrance (front, side, back, through the garage, etc.) Sloped terrain can sometimes make access easier to provide, from an alternate door. If the front door is up a bunch of stairs, a side or back door may well be level; this is especially true for a garage entrance.

We **do not support have different effective dates** for different parts of the Visitability requirements. They should come into effect at the same time to provide uniformity.

Since **triplexes** (as unusual as they may be) are included in most single family designations, and are included in the original Visitability codes, we think they should be included in this one as well.



June 6, 2013

To Whom It May Concern:

Austin Habitat for Humanity wishes to express our support for inclusion of the full Visitability requirements (as proposed by the Mayor's Committee for People with Disabilities) in the International Residential Code Amendments.

Austin Habitat for Humanity builds single family homes under the current Visitability Ordinance. We and other affordable housing providers have built literally thousands of units and have needed very few waivers of the requirements.

With a little planning, Visitability is neither onerous nor expensive. If the developers who serve the lowest income Austinites can make this work, any builder can and should.

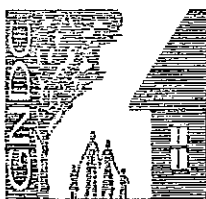
Retrofitting for access in an inaccessible home, on the other hand, can be quite expensive. It can cost thousands to tens of thousands of dollars. Visitability would allow many to use the house, and reduce retrofitting costs for those who need a greater degree of access.

Visitability is about more than making one person's home accessible. It is about making that home accessible to visiting neighbors, friends, and colleagues. It is about creating housing stock that is more flexible. It is about better meeting the needs of an aging Austin. It is about gradually making a more inclusive community.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Kelly Weiss".

Kelly Weiss
President and CEO



Guadalupe Neighborhood Development Corporation
813 East 8th Street - Austin, Texas 78702

(512) 479-6275 (512) 478-9949 fax
[REDACTED]

May 29, 2013

Re: Making homes visitable

To Whom It May Concern:

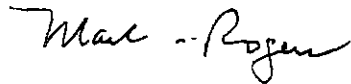
I had the challenge and honor of developing the first single-family homes under Austin's new SMART Housing Program 13 years ago in 2000. Huffman Homes was the builder of those first "visitable" houses and I recall very well our discussions and debates about the requirements. We wondered if we should build portable ramps so that once the final inspections were completed we could remove them and use them on the next homes. Certainly, we assumed, nobody would want a ramp to their front porch. And, we questioned whether the lower light switches and higher outlets would look weird to the prospective first-time home buyers we were trying to attract. We had never seen a home with lever hardware on all the doors. Would they look bizarre as well? There was a minimal added cost for blocking in the bathroom walls for easy installation of grab bars in the future if the home owner wanted or needed them.

In the end, we simply ramped the concrete sidewalk to the porches, installed the lever handles and adjusted the heights of switches and outlets as required and discovered that nobody "freaked out" over these changes. Most people didn't even notice these changes until we pointed them out. In fact, easily a third to half of the buyers later commented on how convenient the ramp made moving in their appliances and furnishings. Others noted how a family member, friend or relative who used a walker or a wheelchair would now have a much easier time visiting them. We learned from those first homes that "visitable" meant "friendly and convenient".

It's true that our subcontractors took a while to get used to the new position for switches, outlets, thermostat and breaker box. More than once in the first couple of years these things had to get redone. Now most builders are very familiar with visitable designs. If production builders make the one-time expense to convert their current designs to be visitable, my experience says they'll actually end up with better, more attractive homes with a wider market. The added costs are negligible.

During the past 13 years, I have developed nearly 100 single-family homes. Only once was it sensible to request a waiver to the accessible ramp. Even then, we installed a ramp that was at only a slightly steeper grade than accessible standards. In my opinion, with the possibility of waivers and with some flexibility, I can think of no compelling reason at all that builders and developers should not be using visitability standards as the norm for single-family construction in Austin and throughout the world.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Mark C. Rogers". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned below the word "Sincerely,".

Mark C. Rogers, Executive Director
Guadalupe Neighborhood Development Corporation

WHY VISITABILITY IS IMPORTANT

"I was 19 yrs. old before I lived in a house that I could get into the bathroom by myself."

"When I visit my mother I'm lucky to make one trip outside each day. She's got 4 steps and my chair weighs over 200 lbs. It's not much better at my brother's with has 3 steps."

"I don't have any able bodied friends because I don't have access to their lives."

"I don't want to remember how many friends and strangers have hurt themselves trying to help me in our out of various houses. I just quit going to parties."

"The stroke was a pain, but I adjusted to everything, everything but having to give up my house that is."

"I heard the burglar and I just snuck behind a door and held my breath cause I couldn't get out, no way to get down the front stairs, and there's even more out the back door!"

"How would you like to say to your friend, can I use your bedroom to urinate?"

"I probably wouldn't use anyone's bedroom. As a guy I'm lucky enough to go outside and use a bush or a woodpile, but I think we have indoor plumbing mandated for a reason."

"My neighborhood association meets in people's houses. I always wondered what they do, but I don't want to be a hassle."

"I will never forget sitting outside the window to listen to this guy performing at a fundraiser held at this woman's home. They were all cozy in the living room and I was out in the driveway straining to hear."

"Her knees were like elephant's knees, but sore looking too, cause she had to crawl around on the carpet cause all the doorways in her folks mobile home were too narrow."

"They had to leave her chair locked up out front. It got ruined by the rain and all the damp out there."

"It was so much easier for the EMS folks to get the stretcher in and out of my house."

"I was afraid to leave my husband with the baby, not cause he's disabled but cause the two of them couldn't get out of the house if there was a fire or something."

"I really didn't realize the impact, all the little adjustments I'd made, all the stuff I just omitted from my life till I finally visited an accessible apartment. I couldn't believe how easy it all was."

"It upset me that we had to wait for someone to die to free up accessible housing."

Basic Access in All* New Houses: 9 Myths and Facts

©Eleanor Smith, Concrete Change, 2012

404-378-7455

1. **MYTH:** Only a small percentage of houses need to have access because only a small percentage of people need disability-friendly features.

Fact: 60% of all new houses are projected to have a resident with long-term, severe mobility impairment over the lifetime of the house itself. ** First, it's not just wheelchair users who can't go up a step, it's people using walkers and others who have stiffness, weakness, or poor balance. Second, like other people, people with disabilities move from house to house; each house needs access. Third, a "percentage approach" disregards the fact that it's not possible to predict in which house a disability will occur. Further, people with disabilities want to visit the homes of friends and relatives.

2. **MYTH:** In practice, a variety of construction and enforcement complexities make it impractical to mandate access in virtually all new houses. It can't be done. **Fact:** It already has been done. Existing ordinances since 2002 and earlier demonstrate indisputable success. For example, the 21,000+ houses built to date in Tucson AZ and the 3,700+ houses built in Bolingbrook IL show that administration and construction can be accomplished without negative unintended consequences.

3. **MYTH:** A long list of universal design features, like lowered cabinets, knee space under kitchen sinks, and roll-in showers should be included in every new house.

Fact: It is not practical to include a long list of features in all new houses. That would undermine the overall housing affordability essential for millions of people with and without disabilities. But it IS practical to construct the most crucial features in all new houses: at least one step-free entrance, and wide enough interior doors, including bathroom doors (32 inches or more of clear passage space).

4. **MYTH:** A zero-step entrance requires a conventional ramp, with 90-degree drop-offs at the edges and hand rails.

Fact: On new construction, the lot can be graded so that a sidewalk ties directly to a porch.



5. **MYTH:** A zero-step entrance works only on a flat lot.

Fact: A steep lot is often even easier than a flat lot.



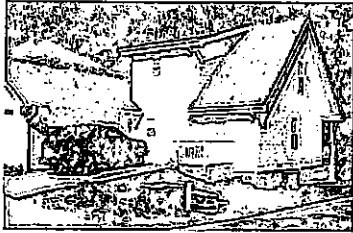
The driveway may need to be steep, but a gently-sloped sidewalk can lead from the driveway to the porch. Or, an alley or attached garage may provide access.

*(Nearly all. Basic access has been demonstrated to be practical in more than 95% of situations.)

***Journal of the American Planning Association*, Summer Issue, 2008.

6. MYTH: *The zero-step entrance must be located at the front of the house.*

Fact: The best location for the zero-step entrance depends on the specific site.



This house on a steep lot has many steps at the front and none at the back. Depending on the lot and house type, a zero-step entrance can be located at the front, back, side or through the garage.

7. MYTH: *A Zero-Step entrance is not practical when building over a basement or crawl space.*

Fact: Building over a basement or crawl space does not deter a cost-effective zero-step entrance.



To keep the wood flooring system away from moisture and termites, the traditional method (a floor high above grade on all sides) is not the only solution. For instance, in Bolingbrook IL, where nearly all houses have basements, a local ordinance requires all new houses to have a zero-step entrance. Builders have used a reliable, low-cost method to create access in the 3,700+ houses already built in Bolingbrook to date. The entry sidewalk ties into the porch with no step.

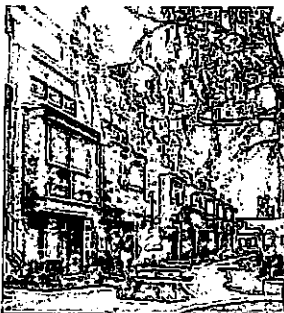
8. MYTH: *Basic access on new houses undermines affordability.*



Fact: Basic access is compatible with affordability. A zero-step entrance and 32-inch-clear doorways require no additional cost to a new house built on a concrete slab, and about \$260 to a new house built over a basement—less than the cost of one bay window. But the current norm of constructing barriers IS unaffordable—in human distress and financial consequences. Steps at all entrances and narrow bathroom doors undermine affordability through renovations that strain family and public funds; through health and safety problems caused by inability to exit one's home independently or enter one's bathroom; and through institutionalization when barriers contribute to moving into a nursing home.

9. Myth: *When it comes to achieving density in urban areas, basic access is impractical.*

Fact: Improved townhouse access is feasible—and important. It is also important to begin constructing low-rise multi-family buildings rather than townhouses in areas where density, but not high-rises, is desired.



Chicago townhouses with basic access.



4-story apartment building under construction in Atlanta offering basic access in all units (Fair Housing Act requirement)



Visitability and the Architectural Barrier Removal Program address two different problems.

Using fees collected from those who opt not to comply with Visitability to supplement the ABRP funding is like using funds from a police department to pay for military services.

1. The ABRP program creates personalized access in lower-income families' homes. There is an income cap for recipients. At least one member of the family must need access. Modifications done are usually more extensive than basic access.

Visitability on the other hand, is about changing the housing stock and social environment. It creates the most rudimentary level of access to any family's home. There would be no income caps, nor would a family member necessarily need the access. It makes the home able to be visited by people with different levels of mobility and makes it more easily adapted at whatever point in time to fit the needs of the occupants.

2. Allowing people to "opt out" by paying into a fund defeats the purpose of Visitability. If the Augusta National Golf Club and the Masters Golf Tournament was allowed to exclude women and non-Caucasians by donating to N.O.W. and the N.A.A.C.P would that make things right?
3. Setting up these kinds of "set-aside" funding sources can easily become a trap as when the funds get tight; the base funding is diverted to other things, and the "additional funding from fees" becomes the primary funding even as it dries up as well.
4. Fee in lieu of affordable housing has not resulted in downtown affordable housing.

The current Visitability Ordinance and SMART housing requirements are not done as incentives to do access. They are city programs, and if a builder wants to participate in these programs they must meet certain standards, including Visitability.

Doing only subdivisions leaves out too many houses. Be fair and include ALL new houses.

Making the waiver criteria plain and simple (but not too easy to get out of doing Visitability) is something ADAPT supports. This will make it easier for builders, architects, etc. to comply, city staff to enforce and the public to understand. The current waiver system (different from the one City Staff was suggesting this time around) seems to work fine for affordable housing developers so we think it should work fine for everyone, but if there is a real problem with the current waiver criteria we want to help develop any changes.

All multifamily housing developers in Austin, and across the USA have had to meet significantly higher access standards than Visitability since the early 1990s. If high electric plugs and lowered switches and environmental controls were the terrible hazard the developers make them out to be, why is there no outcry about these problems from families living in multifamily units? The answer is simple: these features don't create terrible problems.

Is a zero-step entrance **ALWAYS** practical?

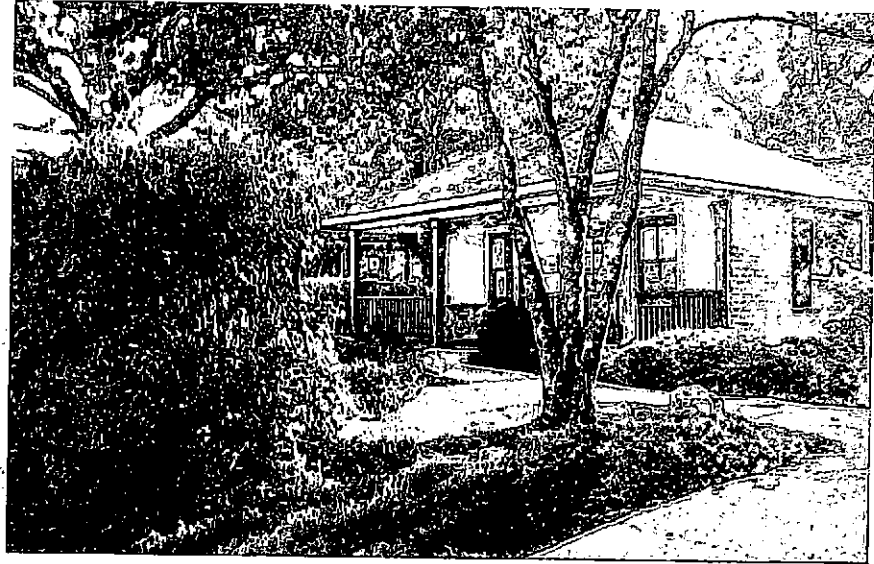
Not always.

Not if the site presents ALL THREE of the following characteristics:

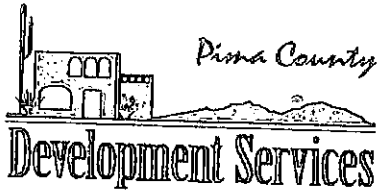
- is steep**
- AND has no driveway**
- AND has no back approach.**



A driveway steeper than 1:12 does not prevent a cost-effective, zero-step entrance.



The very steep driveways above lead to fairly flat parking pads, and slightly sloping sidewalks lead from the driveways to the zero-step entrances.



Carmine DeBonis, Jr.
Director

Chairwoman Maxine Waters,
Ranking Member Shelley Moore Capito;
House Financial Services Subcommittee on Housing and Community Opportunity
2129 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington DC 20910

Dear Mesdames Waters & Moore Capito:

September 29, 2010

In light of the proposed Inclusive Home Design legislation (H.R. 1408), this letter aims to provide a local testimonial regarding the Pima County local mandate for accessibility experience, builder reactions and the real estate environment.

Pima County, AZ, a community of approximately one million inhabitants adopted an inclusive home design ordinance in February, 2002 to provide basic accessibility for homes built within the unincorporated areas of the jurisdiction. The main impetus for these requirements was twofold: to provide disabled persons with basic accessibility to homes when visiting neighbors, friends or family, as well as to provide homes with basic infrastructure in the event a resident experienced a disability. In fact, approximately 70 percent of people experience a temporary, if not permanent, disability at some point in their life and so providing basic housing which can accommodate these circumstances can save the community extensive expenses associated with retrofitting existing non-accessible building stock.

The Pima County Inclusive Home Design Ordinance requires basic accessibility for single family dwellings to include a zero-step entrance, an accessible route through the first floor of the dwelling incorporating clear width and approaches, adjusted heights for electrical devices, compliant door hardware, and bathroom blocking for future installation of grab bars. Since the effective date of the ordinance, over 21,000 homes have been built in the County incorporating the above features.

While these requirements were at first resisted by builders based on the fact that they would require costly changes to conventional design and construction practices, it became evident that with appropriate planning, the construction could result in no additional cost. Indeed, the jurisdiction no longer receives builder complaints regarding the ordinance and the ordinance has been so well incorporated into the building safety plan review and inspection processes that there is no additional cost to the County to enforce its requirements.

From a real estate perspective, homes built to this standard are deemed more marketable, but even more importantly; the accessible features of these homes remain unnoticed when toured by individuals not seeking accessibility. One of the initial concerns of the ordinance implementation was that it would result in homes appearing institutional in nature. This has not occurred within Pima County. As such it would seem reasonable to anticipate like benefits and impacts by extending these requirements on a national level in line with the proposed Inclusive Home Design Act.

Sincerely,

Yves Khawam, PhD
Pima County Chief Building Official