

## Grand Isle Takes Building Codes Seriously

Jefferson Parish, LA – Grand Isle’s location on the Gulf of Mexico means it has sunshine, lots of tourists, and good fishing in abundance – along with devastating storms.

The Jefferson Parish barrier island has endured dozens of hurricanes, tropical storms, and other severe weather events throughout its history. In fact, since Europeans settled here in the 1700s, several storms have put the island, and the town, under water altogether.

“Following Hurricane Katrina, the island looked like a bomb had exploded,” said Nora Combel, the town’s certified building official. As residents and business owners rebuilt, government officials looked for ways to avoid further damage. “We adopted new building codes from the International Code Council and the Federal Emergency Management Agency’s Code of Federal Regulations,” she said.

A building code specifies the minimum requirements necessary to provide safety, guard public health, and reduce property losses. Over the decades, the need for a unified set of standards became apparent, and the nation’s three model code groups responded by creating the International Code Council (ICC). In turn, the ICC created the International Building Code (IBC), applying knowledge gleaned from major storms.

“Lessons learned from Hurricane Andrew in 1992 were incorporated into the 1997 Standard Building Code and the 2000 International Codes,” said Steve Dagers, ICC’s vice president of communications. “And experiences from hurricanes and other natural disasters continue to play a role in the codes, as they are updated every three years. In addition to what is learned from actual events, the international codes are based on building science and technical knowledge.”

Despite parish officials’ good intentions in adopting the stricter guidelines, many Grand Isle residents resisted the changes. These included elevating certain structures while installing ground-level lattice work or other walls designed to break away during flood events. Residents who wanted secure storage buildings could elevate them, but storage sheds remaining on the ground also had to use break-away or flow-through walls. Ground-level structures could not be wired for electricity.

“Prospective homeowners argued that the new codes increased building costs,” Combel said. “They also wanted secure low enclosures for lawn mowers, boats and other equipment.”

But building officials remained firm.

“Residents know we’re serious and we follow the codes very carefully,” said Combel. “They are getting acclimated to having to build with the hurricane straps, high impact glass or shutters. They know that a continuous load-path is mandatory in construction.”

Combel works with Irvin Richoux, floodplain administrator and code enforcement and building official. The team challenges anyone who tries to hedge on the newly adopted codes.

They make at least six inspections, starting with a visit to see the property and go over the building plans. During subsequent inspections, they check the pilings, nail patterning, strapping, plumbing, electrical systems, and then a final, overall review of the work.



“If something isn’t right, it has to be fixed before construction can move forward,” Combel said.

Since Hurricane Katrina, 111 existing homes have been elevated and 261 new homes have been built in accordance with the new codes, with more expected. Hurricane Isaac put all the houses to the test.

“The mayor, a couple of firemen, a couple of policemen and I rode out Hurricane Isaac here in the government multiplex,” said Combel. “Following the storm, we toured the island. We were amazed at how little damage was done to the elevated homes. We saw only a few missing shingles and some damaged siding.”

“It just goes to show you that although mitigating your home may be costly, it saves in the long run,” added Richoux. “There wasn’t any damage to the homes that were constructed according to the new codes.”

