

Citizen Action Can Help the Code Adoption Process for Radon-Resistant New Construction

Decatur, Alabama

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Summary: Adopting a code requiring radon-resistant new construction (RRNC) in Decatur, Alabama, took months of effort by four individuals who were not part of the typical code adoption process. Their actions demonstrate the influence that passionate residents can have on reversing a city council's direction. Decatur also led the way for other Alabama communities to adopt RRNC codes, such as Hartselle and Falkville (also in Morgan County), Muscle Shoals, and Sheffield.

Code Adoption Process: In April 2002, the Decatur Home Builders Association, the Building Department, and the city council agreed to omit the radon protection provision from the new building code. Undeterred, Julie Dutton, a Morgan County Extension Program agent, continued to reach out to council members to explain the serious health consequences from radon exposure in indoor air. Eric Fleischauer, staff writer for *The Decatur Daily*, began publishing what turned into a series of 16 articles focused on radon and the reduction in health risk offered by the radon provision of the building code. From April through June, the council held public hearings on multiple occasions, but the vote was continually tabled or delayed.

Educating Key Stakeholders: As radon awareness increased, the community's mood began to shift. Jimmy Brothers, Building Department Director, decided to propose a building code based on the International Residential Code (IRC), which included RRNC provisions. And two of the three council members who attended a pre-council meeting expressed a desire to pass such a code. In July 2002, the Morgan County Extension Program hosted a seminar on radon in new homes for the city council, homebuilders, and the public. With the mayor and most of the council in attendance, Dr. Lane Price gave an impassioned speech. Director of the Oncology Center at Decatur General Hospital, Dr. Price spoke of the four lung cancer death certificates she had signed that day. Two of the deceased had never smoked. As a result of her presentation and vocal public support for RRNC, the council's position changed dramatically. In September 2002, city council members voted unanimously to enact the new building code with RRNC provisions, requiring builders of new homes to begin using radon-resistant techniques as of October 2002.

Reasons for Success: From the perspective of Brothers and Susan Roberts of the Alabama Radon Education Program, the lesson learned in Decatur is clear—share information and get others involved. “Find someone who wants to stick their neck out and get something done,” said Roberts. In Decatur, it takes only one council member to place an issue on the agenda; that is true in many other jurisdictions as well. Once that happens, Roberts recommends pulling in medical personnel, a radon educator, and supporters from the building department to speak on behalf of reducing radon risk in new homes.