

Fairhope's Mayor Tim Kant Talks Building Codes in DC



by D. Fran Morley

Fairhope Mayor Tim Kant was one of a small group invited to take part in a White House conference this spring on how to pass more resilient building codes. The conference was organized by the White House Intergovernmental Affairs office.

“I was in D.C. in March, and visited with the Intergovernmental Affairs office then where they were talking about FEMA, concerns about rebuilding homes after disasters, and the waste of energy and money when homes have to be rebuilt over and over again. Some time after that visit, they invited me to be part of a panel to talk about building codes because Fairhope has a very strong building code that encourages the building of wind-fortified homes.

Kant said Fairhope City officials decide about ten years ago that one way to help residents deal with rising insurance costs was to require that homes be built stronger to better resist high winds. “The City Council first passed better codes for roofs, and then went one step further for the whole structure, to recommend fortified homes for Fairhope.”

The new codes weren't immediately welcomed by all, Kant said. “We get beat up every time we put a new requirement on, but we've stuck with it, and Fairhope is now one of the nation's leaders in constructing buildings that can withstand high winds. Today, 13 percent of all fortified homes in the entire U.S. are right here in Fairhope.”

FORTIFIED Home™ is a set of engineering and building standards, from the Insurance Institute for Business and Home Safety, designed to help strengthen new and existing homes through system-specific building upgrades to minimum building code requirements to reduce damage from specific natural hazards. The FORTIFIED Home™ program has three levels of designation-Bronze, Silver and Gold.

The White House discussion included about 150 invited individuals from around the U.S., including officials and representatives from FEMA and the U.S. Army, fire and building code officials, traditional builders, concrete builders, and others. Mayor Kant was on a panel that included two other mayors: one from Oklahoma, where tornadoes are common, and one from a city in New York that had been affected by Hurricane Sandy. “We talked about rebuilding after a disaster, and about the codes that Fairhope has in place. In addition, there were other panels with experts talking about climate change because conditions are different in different parts of the country: some areas are getting more rain than usual, some are dryer, some are hotter, some are colder. You have to have the most up-to-date data to be able to deal with those challenges.”

Kant said he is very proud to have been invited to be part of the discussion. “No matter where you live, you're likely to be affected by some type of weather or natural disaster, so it's important for everyone, in all parts of the country. I haven't gotten official feedback yet, but we will be talking more about how to move forward, how to be smarter about where to build and how, and what to do after weather or other disasters.”