I occasionally get feedback from a column reminding me that there is much to know about the world of construction.

In February’s column, I wrote that there’s more than one perspective regarding the use of screws for attaching metal studs to bottom and top tracks. I felt certain at the time that I was going to hear more about that topic, and I certainly have, but from a corner that I hadn’t really considered. And shame on me. But first let me re-state that I always check with a few places or with several people (some are known industry “experts”) before I publish a column, because I know that technology and information changes every day, and you guys are out there in the field while I’m sitting at a computer most days.

In the case of the column in question, I spoke to a technical services representative at a manufacturer of steel framing, an architect, a colleague with considerable experience and an engineer friend. During my discussions with these folks, never did the “head of wall joint” enter the conversation. But the February column did not escape the attention of the manufacturers of these joints; however, they have been very gentle in their admonitions.

So, to no doubt open another can of tasty worms, I shall attempt to amend my remarks about the use of screws with steel framing and try to include the head of wall joint in the discussion. I must add at this point that the head of wall joint situation is a tricky one, and at the time of this writing, AWCI has a document in the works that is intended to clarify much of the confusion. The document in question is several pages long, and has some work to go, since there are several opinions that must be heard before consensus is reached, so I’ll do my best to stay in the area of what is known and out of what is still gray, My challenge here is to turn a document that is several pages long into one. Here we go:

What, then, is this head of wall joint, and how does the practice of using or not using screws to attach said joint to steel framing come in to play?

The head of wall joint is that joint where a non-load bearing fire-rated wall meets something over head, usually the floor of the next story or the roof. To meet code, the joint must be proven to withstand flames, hot gases and a hose stream test, and must accommodate any movement of the floor/roof over head. This is accomplished using one of many assemblies built for that purpose.

The 1999 UL Fire Resistance Directory shows more than 70 dynamic head of wall joint designs that have passed their test—UL 2079( which is similar to ASTM E 1966.) Most of these designs specify that when steel framing is used, the studs are to be nested in the floor and ceiling runners “without attachment.” However, there are some designs that use a “deflection channel,” which the top runner moves up and down in and calls for attachment of the top runner to the studs (some call for #8 screws, and some say #6; some with washers, some don’t). There are other designs that use slotted tracks that call for wafer head screws for attachment to the studs. So be sure to have the detail of your head of wall joint handy before deciding on the screws. And be sure not to attach the wallboard to the top track of such a joint (unless it calls for it), otherwise the ability of the joint to move will be lost.

It was also pointed out that if the screws are used to attach to studs to a track before the wallboard, the screw heads need to be small enough that they don’t cause a bump in the wallboard. Also, there are clips available to attach the studs to the track that may be used in lieu of screws.

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