Measures Sought To Counter Bid By Masonry To “Block” Gypsum Through Code Changes

Contractors Can Help By Monitoring Local Activity and Alerting Gypsum Association

Continuing efforts by the masonry industry to gain a competitive advantage in the construction marketplace by seeking changes in building codes signal the need for a better system of checks and balances by other industries, especially gypsum since gypsum products are the ones typically being targeted. Minimally, effective monitoring methods are needed as local code changes can be proposed—and enacted—without the knowledge of other affected industries. A classic example of the latter scenario occurred in Topeka, Kansas. There, a change in the model code mandating the use of masonry at the exclusion of gypsum products in area separation walls was enacted through a city ordinance, and the gypsum industry didn’t learn about it until after the fact.

Ploy Foiled in New Mexico

More recently, a move by the block folks to wrest an entire segment of the construction market away from gypsum through the building code process had a different ending in New Mexico.

An Albuquerque-based block company sought to have a model building code changed to the exclusive advantage of masonry or certain types of construction, but the attempt failed. The same company later sought to have gypsum fire-rated assemblies excluded at the States level, only to find its efforts again thwarted. Later, the Albuquerque City Council was approached about making changes in the local building code that would require masonry construction in area separation walls, thus precluding the use of gypsum products. This measure, too, was eventually rejected, but only after the Gypsum Association staff and a local member company, working with the city chief building official, enlisted support of the city council to retain existing code provisions.

In New York state, a proposed change to the State Building Code to mandate masonry construction in “elevator and dumbwaiter hoistways and shafts including stairways and chutes, extending three or more stories in height” was altered to continue the use of gypsum board construction in shafts and hoistways.

Contractors’ Help Needed

Attempts of this kind to gain exclusive prescription for masonry products at the expense of gypsum products through any available means are not surprising in the competitive arena, but it underscores the need for the gypsum industry to be represented at the table when building code changes are under consideration. Since code bodies have no legal obligation to notify potentially affected parties of proposed changes in building codes, these other parties are obliged to develop their own sleuthing techniques.

Naturally, the Gypsum Association, on behalf of its member companies, will continue to watchdog presentations to local code groups at every opportunity. However it is difficult to track events at each local, city, county or state council level where proposed changes crop up. Here’s where you come in. The Gypsum Association needs the help of contractors throughout the country to monitor proposed local code changes and to notify the association of proposed changes detrimental to the use of gypsum products. Any contractor aware of such actions is urged to call Bob Wessel direct at (202) 289-5440, Bob is the Gypsum Association’s Director of Code and Technical Services.

Gypsum’s Creditable Record

Gypsum stands on its own merits as a preferred and superior building material, challenging any and all attempts to portray it in a different light, particularly as an unworthy fire-resistant material. Gypsum’s time-honored record includes:

--Consistent performance as a fire-resistant material through numerous testing configurations and conditions
--Ease of installation
--Cost effectiveness
--Positive contribution to the construction time table
--Sound Control

In addition, the model code groups all recognize the fire-resistant properties of gypsum board assemblies and accept gypsum board in fire-rated assemblies. Still, that record will come under attack by masonry interests as they continue to try to tilt the competitive playing field in their favor through lobbying and legislative fiat whenever and wherever possible.