

# Visitability: The Way Of The Future In Home Building

By **ROGER C. CLAAR**, Mayor and **JAMES S. BOAN**, Attorney  
Village of Bolingbrook



**L-R: Kenneth A. Alderson, IML Executive Director, presents Illinois Innovations Award to Roger C. Claar, Mayor, Village of Bolingbrook; Dan Buonamici, Bolingbrook Building Inspector; and Bolingbrook resident Edward Bannister.**

Visitability is a concept that calls for homes to be constructed so that anyone who has a mobility impairment can visit. The Village of Bolingbrook recently received the Illinois Municipal League's 2004 Innovations Award for their implementation of these Visitability standards. This award recognizes the ingenuity of their effort in the hope that their accomplishment will serve as a model for other communities considering adopting these standards.

Four years ago, the Village of Bolingbrook began a grass roots movement to make new single family homes more accessible to those with disabilities and impaired mobility. Today, they are recognized across the nation as a leader in this effort.

In June 2004, the Village passed legislation calling for homebuilders and developers to conform to fundamental accessibility requirements. These requirements include having at least one no-step entrance into homes, minimum widths for doorways and hallways, a first floor bathroom which allows for wheelchair access (while maintaining privacy) and modifications in the locations of light switches and electrical outlets.

Illinois Municipal League officials visited Bolingbrook officials at their November 9<sup>th</sup> Village Board meeting to present them with the 2004 Innovations Award for "Residential Visitability". Bolingbrook showcased their program at the League's annual conference in September and received the most votes cast by other municipal officials as the most innovative program in the showcase.

Bolingbrook's Visitability Ordinance requires all new single-family homes to be built with features that allow a person in a wheel chair to visit without any special assistance.

"It just makes sense, because they are minor modifications that should be just normal business practice throughout America," said Roger C. Claar, Mayor of Bolingbrook.

What now is law in Bolingbrook unfortunately remains on the back burner in many communities, despite efforts by national and local organizations representing the disabled to change the landscape of home building codes.

"Bolingbrook has taken a proactive role, and is setting an example to communities all over the country regarding home design features needed to make residences more accessible to everyone," said Nancy Starns, Vice President and Chief of Staff for Washington, D.C.-based National Organization on Disability.

"We have a long way to go when it comes to legislation to make these features standard all over the country, but Bolingbrook has stepped up and is taking a leadership role. Other communities need to take notice," Starns said.

Early on in the process there was some initial reluctance on the part of homebuilders to jump on the bandwagon, fearing that implementation of these changes in home design might reduce their profit margins.

"Everyone tends to fear change a little, and area builders just needed to sit down and look at it in detail," Claar said.

"It was important that we didn't simply enact a law without consulting everyone the law would affect, because no one wants to be forced into anything.

"But once we met individually with the builders active in the Village and went through the educational process, they warmed to the idea. The builders learned that the financial impact was minimal and the only real costs were the altering of architectural design. Costs associated with an increase in labor or materials were nominal," Claar said.

In 1998 Village staff began meeting to review potential ordinance changes, and conducted a survey of single homebuilders to obtain their input. Once a cost analysis came back showing the average price increase per home would be no more than 1.5 percent, homebuilders' fears were stymied.

One developer led the way in accepting the changes.

"Pasquinelli Homes really stepped up to bat for us and took the lead," said Daniel Buonamici, Bolingbrook's Building Commissioner and one of the program's internal architects.

Pasquinelli began incorporating Visitability features into their new homes in the Whispering Oaks subdivision. Once Pasquinelli began doing it, other builders followed suit.

From 1999 to June 24, 2003, when the Visitability Ordinance was adopted as law, more than a dozen area home builders voluntarily complied with the program, and Bolingbrook's brisk home sales didn't skip a beat, to the contentment of the home building community.

About 2,000 homes built in Bolingbrook over the last three years now are accessible, and by the time the Village builds out to a population of 88,000 in another 10 years, an additional 3,500 homes will meet Visitability standards.

Claar said he became an advocate of creating Visitability codes when his mother began using a walker about five years ago and family members struggled with the possibility of adding grab bars to the shower in the residence she occupied in Effingham.

"We looked at what the cost would be to retrofit the bathroom shower, and it was very expensive, almost cost-prohibitive," Claar said. "That got me very interested in making this code."

The program has drawn the attention of communities in Illinois, as well as nationally.

"We have received calls asking us to offer information from communities like Silver Springs, Colorado, and San Diego," said Buonamici.

What other communities have found out is that the modifications do not impact the sale or resale value of homes, and in fact, are considered features.

"This ordinance isn't only for the resident who is disabled and in a wheelchair, but for those people who have friends or relatives who may want to visit a home and have impaired mobility, such as broken leg, and have been confined to a wheelchair," Buonamici said.

"Wider doors also make it that much easier for people who are moving furniture in and out of a home, or pulling luggage on wheels," Buonamici said.

Starns says the codes are necessary because, "As our population ages everyone is likely to encounter some sort of disability or lack of mobility. Since our entire country has enjoyed a high level of mobility, a loss of mobility will not be easily accepted."

"As our population moves and relocates, especially at retirement age, doesn't it just make sense that the codes for homes should be consistent throughout the country?" Starns said.

Bolingbrook's new ordinance had the strong support of the community as well. Edward Bannister, a Bolingbrook resident, not only supported the ordinance, but helped lobby for it.

Bannister, a past president and member of the Coalition of Citizens With Disabilities and the Vice President of the Statewide Rehabilitation Board, was one of the first residents to retrofit a home in town to accommodate a wheel chair.

Bannister sat in on many meetings that eventually led to the program's adoption.

"With the aging of baby boomers, the existing senior population, and the disability population now numbering 54 million and increasing, accessible homes are something that every city in America must address eventually," Bannister said.

"I am fortunate that, being disabled, I live in Bolingbrook, because the mayor and his staff had the foresight to ensure that accessible single family homes are available to the citizens of this village," Bannister said.

The modifications seem minor, but many communities still have yet to act on Visitability requirements.

One neighboring community to Bolingbrook adopted similar ordinances, but failed to require a no-step entrance.

"A city goes and requires almost all of the features necessary, but fails to require a no-step entrance, so it makes it difficult for people in wheel chairs to enter the homes and take advantage of the other features. Why even adopt the others in the first place?" Bannister said.

Any concerns that the features might hurt a home's resale value are unfounded, say local realtors.

"Over the last few years I have found I can use these features as selling points, because eventually people want to get top dollar for their homes," said Eric Jensen, a sales consultant for Realty World Jensen, Bolingbrook.

"These items increase not just the quality of living for home owners, but the quality of the home itself. They don't detract," Jensen said.

#### AMONG THE "VISITABILITY CRITERIA" ARE:

- ♦ **One no-step entrance into the home**—many homes have incorporated that feature into a side entrance or garage entrance, but many feature it prominently in the front entrance. "The slope is so gradual approaching the front door, you never really notice it," Buonamici said.

- ♦ **One bathroom on the same level as the no-step entrance**—with a minimum 32-inch clear doorway and path to fixtures, occupant must be able to pull in and shut the door behind them.

- ♦ **Bathroom wall reinforcement for grab bars**—these must be installed before drywall and finishing a bathroom, and can use simple grade wood. Once installed, these may go unused for years, but homeowners can then install grab bars economically rather than have to tear out walls and build an infrastructure, an expensive option.

- ♦ **Minimum 42-inch wide hallways and passageways**—when located on the same level as the no-step entrance.

- ♦ **Electrical wall outlets/receptacles shall be 15 inches above the finished floor**—minimum requirement when measured from the finished floor to the center of the light switch.

- ♦ **Wall switches controlling light fixtures and fans shall be a maximum 48 inches above the finished floor**—when measured from the finished floor to the center of the switch.

- ♦ **All exterior and interior doors shall be 3-feet in width**—all doors must provide a minimum of 32-inches of clear opening.

For further information, contact the Village of Bolingbrook at 630/226-8400. ■

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