

Building inspector hammers code home



“When you can make the ties sing like a banjo, they’re OK,” Al Ellington said as he plucked the anchors to a new trailer he was inspecting on Route 723. Four years into his job as country building inspector, he sees about four or five new trailers each month, and “the country’s filling up with people from up north buying land, trailers and houses,” he said.

This was his first inspection of the morning—he makes six to 14 inspections a day—and he was pleased with the owner’s efforts to comply with the codes that he enforced. Ellington checked the plumbing and electric hookup. Now they could put on the skirts and he would give the trailer his seal of approval, and the electricity could be turned on. Without that seal, the trailer would lie dead on the field.

“Because a lot for trailer owners don’t realize the importance of these code, they want to take a shot cut, particularly with the steps and skirting,” he added. Skirting protects the exposed underside and prevents fires. Good steps and railings prevent lawsuits. Even though

skirting and porches make trailers look better, it is safety that the code has in mind, he said. “You just can’t take a chance with trailers when it comes to fire.”

Once a contractor himself, Ellington enjoys driving through the county and seeing attractive trailers, doublewides and houses that are safe and made to last. He can look at any dwelling and tell you where the contractor cut corners, was sloppy, or where hazards exist. And he doesn’t care if people get angry when he makes them “do it right.”

“Yeah, I’m a SOB but I just laugh about it and go my way. I don’t dwell on what happened yesterday.” But for every person he angers, another shakes his hand, usually a home owner he has saved from a devious contractor.

“I turned down a foundation the other day to a log home. The contractor couldn’t believe I turned down his foundation, but a kid could have done better...He went off the deep end and I left him. “Call me when you’ve got it right, he told him “The home owner shook my hand,” he said.

Another home owner had the same feeling. “He’s the man who either makes it a good house or not,” exclaimed Harless Dobbins, a Nottoway native who is “coming home” after 30 years and building a new house.

“The tighter the inspector the better you got it,” he continued while he walked through the skeleton of his house with Ellington, which was his second stop of the day.

“That’s no good” Ellington said, pointing to some insulation the heating contractor had used to seal a hole. “He needs to foam all that..This keeps fire from moving through the walls” Ellington explained.

Outside Ellington was telling Dobbins that the roofers need to get the roof before a strong wind blows the paper off. Dobbins followed Ellington through the site taking note of his observations. Without Ellington’s help, he wouldn’t know what to look for as his dream house was built. “I don’t want problems and this is my last shot. What you don’t get now you don’t get,” he said.

Ellington said that he has no problem with 90 percent of the contractors in the county. But “it took a year to get level with everybody,” he said with a grin. “They’ll try you.” The game between contractors and inspector seemed to be one he enjoyed and there was no doubt in his voice that he expected to win.

“I’ll pull the fixtures off the wall to see if they’ve done it right,” he said. Ellington said he never tried to trick an inspector when he was a building contractor because you always lost money when you had to redo something. Besides, “If I knew it was supposed to be right, then I did it!”

When asked what people could do to make the process of inspection easier, he asked that people post their permits for each stage of construction outside so he could write on it when he came. The permit taped on the inside of a window can’t be signed and the visit would have to be repeated, adding to the frustration of both inspector and homeowner anxious to get on with their plans.

And next, he asked that self-contractors bring in a good set of plans and get their permits before they start work. “I have trouble when I see work going on and they don’t have a permit. I’m not even supposed to inspect a job unless there’s a permit.”

Like the houses he inspects, Ellington is constantly under siege from eternal forces that would erode the principles that are the foundation of his work. Taking short cuts and then covering it up is not “the way we do it here,” he said firmly.