

# PIMA COUNTY REGIONAL FLOOD CONTROL DISTRICT TECHNICAL POLICY

**POLICY NO.:** Technical Policy, TECH-022

**EFFECTIVE DATE:** November 2, 2009

**POLICY NAME:** Use of Flood Openings, Applicability and Requirements

**PURPOSE:** To clarify 16.26.030.E of the Ordinance regarding the applicability of the requirement to provide flood openings (vents) in crawl spaces, non-habitable structures or portions of structures such as attached garages that have enclosed areas below the Regulatory Flood Elevation. This policy also provides guidance on types of allowable screens, louvers or other coverings for these flood openings.

**BACKGROUND:** A structure with an enclosed area below the base flood elevation (BFE) may be subject to flood damage due to the hydrostatic or hydrodynamic force of the flood unless the structure is designed and constructed to address these safety concerns, such as through the use of flood openings. Pursuant to 44CFR 60.3(C)(5), the District is required to ensure that any new structure or substantial improvement with fully enclosed areas below the BFE that is used solely for the parking of vehicles, building access, or storage in an area other than a basement be designed to automatically equalize hydrostatic flood forces on exterior walls by allowing for the entry and exit of floodwaters. Section 16.26.030.E of the Floodplain and Erosion Hazard Management Ordinance (Ordinance) reiterates this requirement, including the provisions prescribing some minimum design criteria for flood openings including:

- A minimum of two openings having a total net area of not less than one square inch for every square foot of enclosed area subject to flooding,
- The bottom of each opening shall be no higher than one foot above grade,
- The openings may be equipped with screens, louvers, valves or other coverings provided that they permit the automatic entry and exit of floodwaters.

In addition, A.R.S. § 48-3609 requires any residential structure to be elevated at or above the Regulatory Flood Elevation (RFE), which is one foot above the BFE. This additional requirement is more restrictive than the CFR, and has the potential to create a situation in which the flood openings do not serve the intended purpose, such as cases where a residence is constructed to the RFE but its attached garage, due to the tire stop, falls just below the RFE. In this instance, applying the flood opening requirement may result in the either the opening being well above the RFE, or if the garage is already elevated on a backfilled stem wall, the opening would be located in the backfilled area. Neither of these provides any additional protection from flood damage.

Additionally, both the CFR and the Ordinance allows the openings to be screened as long as they continue to allow the automatic entry and exit of floodwaters, but no guidance exists regarding the types of screens or louvers that are acceptable. A screen with too fine a mesh has the potential to reduce the effective size of the opening, especially when debris accumulation is considered.

This policy is intended to ensure that flood openings, when required, serve their intended purpose, and to provide guidance on acceptable design and screening of openings of flood openings. It is supplemental to FEMA Technical Bulletin 1-93, *Openings in Foundation Walls*, which should be used for additional information, as it provides guidance on the use of specific types of flood openings.

## **POLICY:**

### **1. Applicability**

This policy applies to non-habitable structures or non-habitable portions of structures (collectively, enclosed areas) that are used solely for the parking of vehicles, building access, or limited storage in an area other than a basement, with an enclosed area below the RFE. Additional applicability information is found in *Technical Policy TECH- 023*.

### **2. Flood Opening Use Requirements**

If allowed pursuant to *Technical Policy TECH- 023*, structures with an enclosed area below the RFE shall be vented as described below.

- a. When enclosed areas are constructed as slab on grade, the bottom of each vent shall be no more than 1 foot above external natural grade as measured at the location of each individual vent.
- b. Any portion of an opening more than two feet above the BFE is not considered to be effective for the purpose of providing relief from hydrostatic and hydrodynamic forces, and shall not be included in the total opening area calculation necessary to meet the 1 square inch of opening per square foot of enclosed area requirement.
- c. Except for attached garages as noted in subpart d., when enclosed areas have floors elevated above natural grade but not elevated all the way to RFE, vents shall be placed as follows:
  - i. If the floor of the enclosure is below the BFE, the bottom of each vent shall be no more than 1 foot above the grade of the floor,
  - ii. If the floor of the enclosure is above the BFE but below the RFE, the bottom of each vent shall be as close as possible to the grade of the floor. The purpose of this requirement is to ensure that the venting occurs below the RFE.
- d. When the floor of an attached garage is elevated six inches or more above the BFE, flood openings are not required, however that portion of the attached garage below the RFE must comply with the flood-resistant materials requirement addressed in *Technical Policy 021*.

### **3. Submittal Requirements**

Permit applications for structures that will not be elevated at or above RFE shall contain the following detailed information:

- A. The size, location, and height above grade of the flood openings and the type of opening cover (if used). The opening locations shall be shown to scale on the site plan. The opening size, height above grade and covering type (if any) may be presented as a note on the site plan or as part of a side-view detail.
- B. Flood openings and covers shall comply with Sections 4 and 5 below.
- C. The specification of flood-resistant materials to be used for all construction below the RFE (as addressed in *Technical Policy 021*).
- D. A signed and notarized covenant that states that the structure is not elevated to the RFE and shall remain non-habitable unless brought into compliance with the rules and regulations for habitable structures or areas.
- E. If a non-habitable area is constructed below the RFE contrary to the terms and conditions of the permit, these covenants shall be signed and notarized prior to the release of any holds.

#### **4. Flood Opening Requirements**

When flood openings are required the following standards shall apply:

- A. Flood openings must allow for the automatic entry and exit of floodwaters.
- B. Doorways do not qualify as an opening because they do not allow for the automatic entry and exit of floodwaters. Overhead garage doors also do not qualify as flood openings, however, flood openings may be placed in overhead garage doors. If flood openings are placed in garage doors, this must be noted in the specific covenants to be signed by the property owners.
- C. Flood openings are only allowed in human doorway doors when flood proofing non-conforming uses.
- D. Flood openings must be placed on a minimum of two different walls.
  - i. If possible, openings must be placed on opposing walls in line with the direction of flow.
  - ii. In the case of an attached garage in which there are not two opposing walls exposed to flow because of the house, flood openings may be placed on adjacent walls.
- E. The bottom of all openings shall be:
  - i. less than 12 inches above adjacent natural grade as measured at the location of the opening for structures with an enclosed area that is not elevated, or
  - ii. as close as possible to the floor elevation of an enclosure having a floor elevated above natural grade but below the RFE.
- F. Any portion of an opening greater than 2.0 feet above the BFE shall not be included in the total opening calculation, as any open space above that elevation is not expected to provide any additional relief of hydrostatic pressure. As such, orienting openings horizontally maximizes the calculated area.
- G. If a structure is elevated on a stem wall, and the area behind the stem wall is not backfilled, fill may not be placed against the outside of the stem wall unless openings are placed through the fill. Otherwise the area within the limits of the stem wall is considered to be a basement, which is not allowed within a regulatory floodplain.

#### **5. Flood Opening Covers**

NFIP rules allow flood openings to be covered with louvers, grates or screens. The following covers are acceptable for use:

- A. Screen, provided:
  - i. The mesh openings are at least:
    - a. 1/4 inch for BFEs 1 foot or less in depth
    - b. 1/2 inch for BFEs greater than 1 foot and less than 2 feet in depth
    - c. 1 inches for BFEs greater than 2 feet and less than 3 feet in depth.
    - d. For flow depths of 3 feet or more, screens must be designed by an Arizona registered civil engineer
- B. Grates, provided:
  - i. The minimum opening size is at least
    - a. 1/2 inch for BFEs 1 foot or less in depth
    - b. 1 inch for BFEs greater than 1 foot and less than 2 feet in depth
    - c. 2 inches for BFEs greater than 2 feet and less than 3 feet in depth.
    - d. For flow depths of 3 feet or more, covers must be designed by an Arizona registered civil engineer.
  - ii. The area taken up by the solid portion of the grates is subtracted from the total opening size.

- C. Louvers, provided:
  - i. The louvers are permanently open (no hinged or closeable louvers except if designed to automatically open when exposed to floodwaters as demonstrated by a report from an Arizona registered civil engineer or as approved by FEMA),
  - ii. The spacing between louvers is at least:
    - a. 1/2 inch apart for BFEs 1 foot or less in depth
    - b. 1 inch apart for BFEs greater than 1 foot and less than 2 feet in depth
    - c. 2 inches apart for BFEs greater than 2 feet and less than 3 feet in depth.
    - d. For flow depths of 3 feet or more, covers must be designed by an Arizona registered civil engineer.
  - iii. The area taken up by the solid portion of the louvers is subtracted from the total opening size.
- D. Smartvents™ or other FEMA approved opening cover.
- E. Other methods of covering flood openings may be used if supported by a report from an Arizona registered civil engineer.

**6. Documentation of Compliance**

- A. Documentation of Openings with No Covers
 

If no flood opening covers are used the four required photographs taken for the Elevation Certificate may be sufficient provided that they clearly show all four sides of the structure and all of the flood openings are visible.
- B. Documentation of Openings with Covers
 

If flood opening covers are used, in addition to the photographs outlined in Section 6.A, an additional photograph shall be required that shows a close-up view of a typical opening. If more than one flood opening cover type is used, a photograph of each type must be provided. The surveyor must state that the close-up photo is typical of all openings or of a specified number of the openings. The close-up photo(s) of the opening cover(s) may not be used as a substitute for the one of the four required photographs for the Elevation Certificate.

APPROVED BY:

  
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 Suzanne Shields  
 Director

Date

Original Policy Approved:  
 Date(s) Revised: