



San Juan County
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POLICIES/PROCEDURES/INTERPRETATIONS

Under Floor Areas

(Usable, Occupiable, Habitable, & Contributing to Floor Area)

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ISSUE: How are under floor areas identified and when are they considered as adding to the floor area of a building?

ANALYSIS: The term "floor area" is referenced in applying code requirements and/or restrictions. The International Building Code provides similar definitions for both "Building Area" and "Gross Floor Area".

"Gross Floor Area" is defined as:

"The floor area within the inside perimeter of the exterior walls of the building under consideration, exclusive of vent shafts and courts, without deduction for corridors, stairways, closets, the thickness of interior walls, columns or other features. The floor area of a building, or portion thereof, not provided with surrounding exterior walls shall be the usable area under the horizontal projection of the roof or floor above. The gross floor area shall not include shafts with no openings or interior courts."

The building code utilizes this definition when determining the means of egress requirements for buildings. A means of egress is required from all occupied portions of a building. Un-occupiable areas, such as crawl spaces and attics, while generally requiring access openings, are not required to be provided with a means of egress. From this discussion it is clear that the definition of "floor area" is not intended to include un-occupiable areas.

The codes generally describe occupied spaces within a building as being Occupiable or Habitable and attaches requirements based on these classifications. Occupiable and Habitable spaces are generally required to provide a 7' ceiling height. However, allowances for ceiling heights down to 5' are allowed for sloped ceiling areas; as are ceiling heights down to 6'4" in non-habitable, but occupiable, basements.

Confusion occurs when different terms are applied to under floor areas. The codes identify these under-floor areas as basements, cellars, and crawl spaces. However, of these terms, the codes only define "basement".

"Basement" is defined as:

"That portion of a building that is partly or completely below grade."

However, while not defined in the building codes, Webster's Third New International Dictionary defines both cellars and crawl spaces.

"Cellar" is defined as:

"A room or a set of rooms often used for storage and for protecting the building above from ground dampness and sometimes not possessing a finished interior – sometimes distinguished from basement."

"Crawl Space" is defined as:

"A space about 2 feet high provided in a building in order to enable workmen to gain access to plumbing, wiring, and other equipment."

Additionally, while under floor areas may not be habitable or occupiable, they may be useable for equipment and/or limited storage. Building code requirements are designed to consider other issues including, but not limited to, fire loads and sources of ignition. For that purpose, while usable under floor space is not defined in the codes, the building and fire codes attach additional requirements for useable under floor storage areas. Additionally, the residential code contains additional structural design requirements for attic members where there is more than 3'6" in height; and therefore presumably creating a useable storage area.

POLICY:

1. Portions of Under-floor areas with a ceiling height of 3'6" or less shall be classified as Crawl Spaces and shall not be considered as Useable Storage areas or in floor area calculations.
2. Portions of Under-floor areas with a ceiling height of greater than 3'6" but less than 6'4" shall be consider Useable Storage Cellars but shall not be considered in floor area calculations.
3. Portions of Under-floor areas with a ceiling height of greater than 6'4" inches but less than 7' shall be considered Occupiable but Non- Habitable Basements with Useable Storage and shall be considered in floor area calculations.
4. Portions of Under-floor areas with a ceiling height of 7' or more shall be considered either Occupiable but Non- Habitable Basements with Useable Storage or Habitable Basements, as dictated by design, and shall be considered in floor area calculations. Beams and girders spaced not less than 4 feet on center may project not more than 6 inches below the required ceiling height in Habitable Basements.

Modifications to this policy may be permitted by the building official where special site specific conditions exist.