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For immediate release 7/15/03

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State building officials offer five tips for safe decks, balconies

(Salem) Summer means increased use of elevated decks and balconies. For homeowners and renters who worry about the safety of their decks and balconies, the state Building Codes Division offers Oregonians five important tips.

For homeowners and renters who *don't* worry about the safety of their decks and balconies there is a sixth tip: Pay attention to the other five tips, because so far this year accidents involving decks, balconies, and porches have killed at least 12 people and injured 88 nationwide. It can also happen in dry-rot-friendly Oregon, where a 1999 deck collapse in Mehama killed one person and sent 25 to the hospital.

The five tips for those who worry:

Tip 1: Prevention is preferable to any cure for a faulty deck, porch, or balcony. If you're planning one, get the building permit that your jurisdiction requires.

Don't know where to get a permit? Joan Stevens-Schwenger, manager of BCD's Tri-County Service Center in Portland, suggests that you go to BCD's Permits Protect Web site, www.permitsprotect.info or call your local city hall and ask what building jurisdiction you should contact for your permit. Costs vary from jurisdiction to jurisdiction, may be based on the value of the proposed structure, and may include zoning, plan review, and permit fees. The Permits Protect site also offers information and resources to help you find answers to a host of other building code, construction, and permit-related questions.

You are required to get a permit if you're adding a deck more than 30 inches off the ground or adding a balcony or porch. A permit provides you and future occupants a safety net, ensuring that the structure will meet Oregon's building requirements for strength and stability and that it will be inspected by a professional before guests set foot on it.

Tip 2: "The first thing to do if you're the owner or renter of a home that already has a deck or balcony is to contact your building jurisdiction and see if the deck or balcony was properly permitted," said Mike Ewert, BCD dwelling-code specialist. "If it was, the structure was determined to be safe when it was built. Then the question to consider is whether the wood has deteriorated enough to make it unsafe."

Tip 3: Any deck, porch, or balcony so crowded that people have difficulty moving about is probably overloaded. Don't be timid about requiring guests to move off the deck or balcony into other rooms or onto the lawn or patio.

Tip 4: You (or a building inspector that you hire) should conduct a twice-yearly inspection of your deck, porch, or balcony to look for the following:

- Split or rotting wood
- Loose or missing nails, bolts, or screws
- Missing, damaged or loose support beams and planks
- Wobbly handrails or guardrails

Proper footings, columns, beams and attachments; adequate lateral stability; appropriate building materials and workmanship; and environmental factors such as soil type, slope, wind and rain, and drainage patterns can affect the immediate and long-term safety of your deck or balcony. If you or a building inspector believe that repairs are needed, you may need a permit.

Tip 5: If you are planning a party that involves a crowd on your deck, balcony, or porch, you must weigh the cost of prevention against the cost of a possible accident. To get an expert opinion about what kind of load your deck, balcony, or porch will safely handle, you'll need the services of a structural engineer. You can find one by looking in the Yellow Pages of your local telephone directory.

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