

FIVE?...FOUR?...THREE?...TWO!!!

by Gary Lewis

This column is not about the countdown for a Mars Landing space mission. It is about bedrooms; specifically, what counts as a bedroom from a safety perspective. The title is taken from a ranch home built over a finished basement located in a rural county near Atlanta. We inspected this home about four years ago. The client stated that there were five bedrooms during our initial conversation. The colorful flyer displayed at the home confirmed the bedroom count. Can you imagine the difficulties presented as we counted down: five...four...three...two?

Let's begin with the "master bedroom" located at the left rear of the main floor. This room had two windows as well as an exterior door that opened onto what was originally the back deck. One of the previous owners decided that the deck was more usable year round as a sunroom. They enclosed the deck, added a roof and a new exterior door with steps to the back yard. Very nice! However, there was no longer a means of egress from the bedroom to the outside. So, now we have four bedrooms.

The good news was that the two original secondary bedrooms were fine. They both had emergency egress windows and a nearby smoke detector.

Proceeding to the basement, we began with the bedroom at the right rear. It had an exterior door to grade, so there was a means of egress. Great! However, upon opening the closet door, we discovered a natural gas central furnace. Gas fueled appliances cannot take their combustion air from a bedroom. So, now we have three bedrooms.

Imagine our surprise when moving to the right front "bedroom" in the basement and finding a gas water heater located in the closet. Now we have only two legitimate bedrooms. Get it? Five?...Four?...Three?...Two!!

What a story! You may be having a

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difficult time believing it's true. This could never happen to you, could it? Well, the good news is that rarely do we find a house where three "bedrooms" are not safe for use as bedrooms. However, frequently there are one or more. While working on notes for this article, Darla, my daughter (one of the best young inspectors in this area), began to recite house after house that we have inspected where one or more "bedrooms" were unsafe.

Just because a room contains a closet and bedroom furniture, it is not necessarily a bedroom. Safety wise, the closet is not important. There are a few simple rules that are much more important.


First, a bedroom must have a means

of safety egress and rescue. A properly sized window or an exterior door satisfies this requirement. If an exterior door is not present, the window must have at least 5 square feet of openable area for a ground floor bedroom, and 5.7 square feet if it is on an above grade level. This size is based on the amount of space needed for a fully equipped fireman to enter the home for rescue purposes. Sill height should be no more than 44 inches above the floor.

Second, gas appliances cannot have combustion air supplied from a "sleeping room", aka bedroom. Taking combustion air from a room can result in insufficient oxygen for proper combustion. More importantly, this lowers the available oxygen for breathing.

Third, there should be a smoke detector within 10 feet of the "bedroom" doorway. Although this distance has only recently become specific, smoke detectors can be added as safety upgrades. Considering the low cost of smoke detectors and their value for saving lives, I recommend installing one in each bedroom in addition to those in the immediate vicinity (within 10 feet). This is the easiest and least expensive bedroom issue to correct.

Finally, and not often a problem, is that the minimum room size is 70 square feet. How many seven by ten foot rooms have you seen? Maybe more than I have!!!

Remember these simple but important safety considerations when looking at prospective properties. Failure to do so may result in a lower profit margin when an observant inspector or appraiser understands these requirements. Also, remember that a family will soon occupy the home. I certainly don't want to read about one of my clients or their family perishing in a fire because of one of the above reasons. Do you? When looking at potential investments, remember: five?...four?...three?...two!!! 

Gary Lewis is a home inspector with multiple GA certifications, and 25 years experience in maintenance, construction and repair. Please visit his website at www.prospecthi.com for a complete list of his qualifications, or call his office, ProSpect, at 770-386-1322.



In future columns, Gary will answer inspection questions from investors. The only ridiculous question is the one you don't ask. If it is a question in your mind, it is also likely to be one for others. From time to time, as space permits, he will also provide information regarding code issues that are commonly found in investment properties. Email your questions to Gary at gllewis@bellsouth.net.