

Uponor Case Study: Opening Minds to PEX—One Jobsite at a Time

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Ultimately, though, the rigid realities of copper made the decision obvious. “The calculated cost of installing copper piping created significant budget issues,” admits Parham. At that point, Armstrong Mechanical recommended PEX, a superior option that would be installed within the tight construction schedule and save about \$305,000 by avoiding the expense of copper pipe, all while streamlining the installation. In all, 10 miles of PEX pipe, supplied by Morrison Supply Company, was installed in the two dorms.

Once the decision to use PEX was made, Bruce Wood from Pepco Sales and Marketing, a Dallas-based rep firm, worked with Carpenter and his Armstrong team to design an efficient and time-saving plumbing installation. “Because Armstrong had installed PEX in previous jobs, we used strategies that they were familiar with, including brackets, straps and through-the-wall supports,” Wood says.

Pepco facilitated both classroom and on-site training to get 40 new Armstrong installers trained on how to install PEX in preparation for the dorm project. “Before they stepped onto the job site, I made sure that every single contractor knew how to make a proper fitting connection and perform a visual inspection,” assures Wood.

Wood maintains that his role goes beyond merely promoting product. “As a sales rep, I partner with the contractors on their side of the table and provide them with as much value as possible in the form of saved time and money. At the same time, they become familiar with the brand and help get the word out later,” explains Wood. Tom Stewart, director of Southeast Sales for Uponor, echoes the notion. “It’s important for sales reps to grasp the linkage between them and the manufacturer in making the contractor feel appreciated and well taken care of.”

The training ended up being a great success. “The installers couldn’t believe how easy it was to visually verify that the job was done correctly,” Wood says. “They could quickly identify the tight friction fit against the ring and coupling, providing them peace of mind knowing that the job was done correctly.”

Properly trained, the installers enabled the project to reap the full benefits of PEX. “By omitting copper, we saved money, not only on the material costs, but also on labor costs because PEX installations are quicker than copper,” Carpenter said. Parham estimates that several hundred man-hours were saved by installing PEX. “We prefabricated the headers with half-inch run-outs to all of the fixtures, which saved us significant time on the jobsite,” he explains.

Another major advantage of PEX was its flexibility. “We used between 80 and 85 percent fewer pipe fittings with PEX than we would have with copper,” reports Carpenter. “The piping’s flexibility allowed us simply to put it in place and run it to different locations.”

Parham extols the elimination of jobsite callbacks by using PEX instead of copper. “With PEX, I can walk the building site and visually see that each fitting is done correctly,” he observes. “You simply don’t have that opportunity when you install copper.”

The project was a large-scale installation, and it was imperative to stay organized in order to avoid mistakes and future headaches. “It was important for us to ensure that the installation itself looked nice, while also staying organized on site,” Parham says. “We wanted to ascertain that the PEX was protected from sharp edges and metal studs, and we checked the worksite throughout the installation.”

Pepco’s Wood was impressed to see that all the multiport tees looked great and therefore added to the professional look of the installation. “The worksite had an atmosphere of professionalism,” he observes. “I was very impressed with the entire project – the design, the training of new installers and the installation itself.”

Wood hopes that this project’s success will help make PEX more accepted in the marketplace. “Old habits are hard to break,” he says, “and the biggest obstacle I face in my day-to-day job is to gain acceptance from engineers and owners who are unfamiliar with all the benefits PEX provides.”

To this end, Wood is often seen driving the decked-out Uponor van, eager to invite contractors, engineers and owners to his mobile showroom to demonstrate how PEX jobs look professional and organized with the use of supports and straps. “The van not only fosters brand recognition, but also, with its inventory of samples, serves as a mobile education center for PEX,” explains Wood. “We are slowly changing old behavior through education, site visits to new jobs and peer facilitations,” he says.

Wood is known to invite pros who are unfamiliar with PEX to call on their industry peers with PEX experience for feedback and information on the product. “It’s the best way to build trust with those who haven’t made the leap from copper to PEX yet,” Wood said. “They can call professionals in their own industry — there’s a level of trust there that we simply can’t provide.”

The 10 miles of PEX piping found in the university project is only the beginning of many new similar ventures in Texas, according to Wood, who is convinced that the tide is changing with each new completed project. “We are changing attitudes, one project at a time,” he states.

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<http://uponor.oreilly-depalma.com/casestudies/opening-minds-to-pex.shtml>.

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