

April 4, 2004

Letter to Editor
Greenville News

Re: Tim Smith
Staff Writer
Articles on Fire Sprinklers

The ongoing series of articles on the pros and cons of fire sprinkler systems, prepared by Staff Writer Tim Smith is a wonderful example of the type reporting needed from the main stream media such as your paper. These articles high lighted several problems that exist in this state and all other states related to Life Safety systems. Fire sprinkler systems and other types of fire protection systems are small part of a large group of proven Life Safety and Life Saving systems. When fire sprinkler systems are engineered, installed and maintained properly in strict accordance with the applicable NFPA Standards and the requirements of the Local Authority Having Jurisdiction, the systems will provide a high degree of protection from fire injury or death for the citizens of our state and elsewhere. Fire sprinkler systems are the most reliable equipment for first aid fire fighting. However when we start addressing the need and requirement for these systems, we immediately find some of the real culprits and driving forces that keep these systems from becoming a reality. MONEY, EGOS, IGNORANCE, AND GREED!!!

One of the terms used to defend the reasons for not insuring that this protection is in place for our citizens, is "Lack of Resources". That means lack of "MONEY." Another term that must be applied to the various entities that will do anything to keep from providing the necessary funds for fire protection is simply "GREED."

There is one thing that must be made clear from the start. The State of South Carolina has adopted the necessary Building Codes, Fire Codes and Standards that provide the necessary requirements for the protection of the citizens whether at home, travel, work or play. Give the fire professionals the tools and resources that will allow them to do their job as mandated in the already adopted codes. The State of South Carolina has a very dedicated group of Fire Protection Professionals working for the cities, municipalities and at the state level to insure these codes and standards are implemented and followed. They are short handed and need further training. The "Lack of Resources", (MONEY), and the lack of support from our elected officials, both at the state and local levels, as well as the federal government, prevent these fire protection professionals from doing their duty in protecting the citizens. (IGNORANCE)

Often times the main stream news media will waltz around an issue rather than going straight to the core of the problem. I say don't worry about walking on egg shells around the problem, go ahead, and walk on some toes and/or hands, which ever are sticking out the most.

Some developers will scream and holler when told they must abide by the fire codes. They go to their favorite politician or local official and ask for relief and many times they get by without following the rules.

Fire Protection Systems as we know them today were started well over a century ago. Fire sprinkler systems were first developed by owners of plants to protect their investments. The continued development of fire fighting techniques, equipment, and engineering has proven how reliable sprinkler systems are, and this continued progress in technology and use has moved these systems into the forefront as acceptable Life Safety systems. The fire systems developed in the mid 1800's, is today, a tremendously effective and ECONOMIC method to control fires, save lives and protect property.

Yet here we are in a discussion today that should have been settled years ago. Why are we asking ourselves today; why have some facilities that provide sleeping quarters and facilities of assembly been exempted from fire sprinkler system requirements? Some of the reasons are (MONEY & GREED).

You look at the latest tragic loss of life in the Comfort Inn fire on Greenville's Eastside, and you just ask, how could this happen today? How many tragedies must it take before we realize that the price of a life cannot be measured against the few dollars it takes to provide the necessary protection? How many lives and injuries must we count up before we do something to correct the mistake so it will not happen again? After the tragedy several politicians jumped up and said we will pass more laws to correct the situation. The newspapers and airwaves were filled with good news that something would be done.

What Happened? They ran upon the old standby character Mr. GREED. The news reports stated that the good folks in some of the Charleston, SC historic inns could not afford to pay for the installation of sprinkler systems to protect their property. You must ask yourself, can they afford to put in carpets, replace roofing, and install fine furniture etc; well sure they can. In most cases the cost of a carpet installation in a motel or inn is as much or more than the cost of a sprinkler system. The carpet will then need replacing in 4 or 5 years depending on the traffic. This is an accepted cost of the owners of these facilities. Look at the cost of a fire sprinkler system. If the cost of a fire sprinkler system installation is an equal cost or less than the amount of money spent on carpet installation. That cost appears to be a very sensible expenditure, particularly if it will potentially save the customers, their employees and themselves from injury or death. Further the fire sprinkler system, the fire alarm system and the other fire fighting techniques and alarms will lower the cost of building insurance for a property owner and over a period of time, these systems will actually repay the cost of installation. Back to the carpet; you must plan on replacing the carpet to keep you're the inn fresh and clean so your customers will continue coming back. Why not publicize the fact that your facility is protected by an automatic sprinkler system that will protect your life. The federal government mandates that all employees stay in a facility that has automatic sprinkler systems. When a citizen is traveling they should demand that the hotel or inn where they plan to stay is equipped with an automatic fire sprinkler system and alarm system.

If the traveling public and the local and state governments made this a rule, you would see a dramatic change of attitude very quickly. Sprinkler protection may then become a good idea.

The cost for installing carpet is classed a business expense and accepted by all, no problem. The elimination of a fire sprinkler systems because they are thought to be costly, big problem, negligent homicide. It is beyond all comprehension that our state and nation is still years behind in providing the simple life protection services of a fire sprinkler system in all of our motels, inns, B&B, public and private schools, and college housing, and all large office buildings. Why can't the cities and municipalities give these businesses a break on their taxes like they do big corporations that move into the state? These small businesses are just as important as the large one and they will provide a quicker return than the larger corporations.

A portion of a News article dated February 4, 2004 carries a statement by Mr. Tom Sponseller concerning the type of facility to be covered under a mandated sprinkler ordinance. Any legislation should apply to all public buildings not just hotels that are to be retrofitted with a fire sprinkler system. The quote Mr. Sponseller issued stated "Saving a life is worth every dollar", "but when you're talking about a building it gets real expensive". It does cost a fair amount but as he said, it is worth every dollar.

Many times in the past, developers have stated that the requirement for sprinklers, fire alarms, smoke detectors, etc; will put their project over budget. Either the budget is wrong or the project should not be built if that small amount of money is a problem. Building additional facilities in an area that is already short of resources does not make much sense. Years ago developers stated that the installation of a smoke detection system in residential housing would damage the market. Looking now at the robust housing market we are experiencing and all the other building projects now underway; that seems like a pretty dumb statement.

How do we develop the resources needed to move forward with a comprehensive plan to upgrade the fire service in our state and locally? Get the same group of local leaders that spent so much time, energy and money attempting to secure RESOURCES for a baseball stadium that would benefit about 4000 people and turn those people loose finding resources for the fire service? I wonder how many fire officials could have been hired, trained, and equipped with the resources that were used to remove a bridge and build a new walkway across a small stream to satisfy some EGOS.

I don't remember any emergency closed door sessions convened to help develop resources for the fire service. If the same amount of energy was employed for life safety concerns and needs, fewer people would die in fires.

Correcting the problems and attitudes will require more than the ranting of an old "fire protection professional", it will take the commitment of the citizens of this state in changing out those elected officials that have failed to do their elected duty.

The articles published to date hopefully will encourage all citizens to learn more about the process and demand more life safety systems in the places they work, sleep, and play.

Fire sprinkler systems are the most reliable form of fire suppression available today. On February 18th a letter from a reader stated that fire sprinklers failed 16 per cent of the time. I believe you will find that particular study was based on an operating pressure of 7 PSI and it was just an estimate of a defective product. Very few, if any water supply systems, other than a well system on a farm, will have pressure that low.

The National Fire Protection Association is the largest and most respected group of fire protection professionals in the world. The NFPA maintains records of fire from all over the world; they have no record of a fire killing more than two people in a completely sprinklered building where the system was properly maintained and operating, except in an explosion or a flash fire or where industrial fire brigade members or employees were killed during fire suppression operations. If a fire sprinkler system is properly installed and maintained as required by the applicable NFPA Standards as adopted by the State of South Carolina, injuries and death by fire will be rare. (Reference from: National Fire Protection Associations, 2002 Automatic Fire Sprinkler Handbook.)

Fire sprinkler systems are an instant fire fighter. Water will immediately be delivered upon fusing of the fusible element. New quick response sprinkler heads will begin delivering water to a fire in a few seconds after the fire ignites.

Another excellent article appeared in the February 4, 2004 issue of the News. The article written by Ms. Jeanne Brooks was an excellent piece of work by the columnist. She reported factually on a well known blunder that happened in a Las Vegas hotel several years ago. That information presented how 'Priceless' fire sprinkler systems are.

Another area of the fire protection business that people rely to strongly on is the fire alarm system. I will state that every building should have a well designed, properly operating and maintained fire alarm system. Often times the wrong assumption is made in thinking a fire alarm system "PROTECTS" a facility. A fire alarm system is required to "DETECT" the present of excessive heat or smoke depending the application, as well as reporting through a monitoring company that a flow switch has activated to indicate a flow of water within the sprinkler system, assuming the building is so protected. The fire alarm system does nothing to put out the fire. The system will alert residents and the monitoring companies who will intern notify the proper authorities. The fire alarm system at the Comfort Inn may have performed as designed. However the hallways were completely over whelmed by the accelerant used to start the fire, an instant application of water would have been the only chance an occupant of the hotel would have had that night. That instant water discharge could come only from a sprinkler system.

In another article the Greenville County School System officials stated to Mr. Tim Smith they were protected from fire by duct smoke detectors in the libraries in the school district.

That is a wrong assumption, they have a signaling system that will shutdown fans and send a signal to the monitoring company, who in turn must alert the fire department, who must then drive to the fire scene and attempt to save what is left.

You must pray there are not problems with this chain of events. One breakdown in communication such as the library door fire going undetected could spell disaster again. Sprinklers are always there if you maintain the systems properly. In various statements in the article it appeared that employees of the district were not sure what was in their schools. If the proper maintenance is being performed, they should remember the interruption from the testing and inspection group. Periodic inspections are required by state law. Proper reports must be sent to the Local Authority Having Jurisdiction. This confusion should be corrected immediately.

As you can see through all of this rambling that a well planned effort must be in place for a complete life safety system to work. All of the parts and pieces are in place to give this assurance that a system will work. Most areas have good Fire Departments and good equipment. Fire Sprinkler Technology and Fire Alarm Technology are available and ready for installation by qualified fire sprinkler and fire alarm contractors. What we all need is leadership without political strings, and the road blocks of EGOS, GREED, IGNORANCE and failed promises. The resources are there if we all work to put this program together.

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Harvey is a near 50 year veteran of the fire sprinkler industry, Holds a Level IV NICET Certificate in Fire Sprinkler Design, a former Manager of the Fire Protection Division of Fluor Daniel International, a Principal Member of the NFPA-20 Committee on Fire Pumps, a voting member of Underwriter Laboratory STP Group 47 for fire equipment, valves and pumps, member National Fire Protection Association for 30 plus years, member of the American Fire Sprinkler Association, member South Carolina Fire Sprinkler Association, member of the AFSA Carolinas Chapter, and the Tennessee Fire Sprinkler Contractors Association. Founder of Harvey & Associates, Inc., a holder of Fire Sprinkler Contractors licenses in several states, Fire Alarm Contractors Licenses in two states, and Electrical Contractors licenses in two states. Harvey is author of over forty technical fire sprinkler articles and white papers published in national and international publications.