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Fire Sprinkler Advisory Board Shocked at Wheeling's Potential Ordinance Reversal at Workshop Tonight

Says trustees are "turning a blind eye to public safety"

Orland Park, IL (July 19, 2004) – In a move clearly designed to protect the personal financial interests of a few at the cost of many, the Wheeling Village Board is considering a watered down version of their fire sprinkler ordinance that could significantly effect the safety of commercial buildings. The potential ordinance revision may also affect new single-family and manufactured homes. – a surprisingly shortsighted act considering that three-quarters of fire deaths occur in homes.

The meeting is scheduled for 7:30 p.m. tonight at the Wheeling Village Hall, 255 W. Dundee Road, Wheeling.

The Board apparently buckled under to pressure during its July 12th meeting from one particularly vocal Trustee, Patrick Horcher, who along with his father Mike Horcher – also a Wheeling Village Trustee – operates a greenhouse enterprise in Wheeling, comprising a variety of business concerns, including construction interests.

http://www.fb.com/news/fbn/00/02_07/html/illinois.html

The younger Horcher's on-the-record comments included an unfounded attack on the Wheeling Fire Chief and his staff for their active support of fire sprinkler technology and the Illinois fire service in general.

"If they follow the lead of Trustee Horcher and reject an ordinance intended to do nothing but protect the lives and property of the residents of their village, the Wheeling trustees will be recklessly turning a blind eye to public safety," said Tom Lia, executive director of the Northern Illinois Fire

Sprinkler Advisory Board (NIFSAB). “That is not only a town management failure; it may well be a carelessness of duty as elected officials.”

Wheeling’s fire sprinkler ordinance – in place since 2001 – is a point of pride for the community and the state. The Village is one of 29 Illinois municipalities with zero fire tolerance because of their zero minimum sq. ft. requirement. Wheeling is one of 16 towns/districts that have made the safety of their residents and firefighters a priority by requiring fire sprinkler protection for new one- and two-family homes. Wheeling is the only Chicago-area municipalities that require sprinklers in manufactured homes.

The current ordinance also requires fire sprinkler protection in all commercial buildings. In the July 12th meeting, Patrick Horcher expressed an interest in revising the ordinance so only commercial buildings 12,000 sq. ft. and larger would require fire sprinklers. If the Wheeling Board makes those revisions, it will move Wheeling from the top to the bottom of the Chicago-area municipal fire safety list based on minimum square footage requirements.

By relegating the fire sprinkler ordinance discussion to a “workshop” to be held July 19, 2004, it is clear that the Wheeling Board hopes to sweep the issue under the rug.

“There is a reason why firefighters and fire chiefs support the concept of fire sprinklers and that reason is that sprinklers work to save lives in a way that smoke alarms cannot – by putting water on the fire before it grows to deadly proportions,” Lia said.

“This isn’t just NIFSAB’s view, it is the collective position of countless respected federal agencies and national organizations and it is supported by decades of sound fire trend and data analysis. The Wheeling trustees can try to distract the public from these facts, but they cannot change them.”

Home fires grow and spread rapidly, becoming deadly very quickly – in as few as three minutes or less according to the National Institutes of Standards and Technology (NIST). Automatic fire sprinklers react quickly to a flame’s high temperature, spraying the fire area below the sprinkler with water. This quick response puts out the flames and slows the spread of smoke, giving occupants the time to escape alive.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency’s U.S. Fire Administration is among the strong governmental advocates for residential fire sprinklers. In announcing the National Residential Fire Sprinkler Initiative last year, the agency administrator said, “We know how important residential sprinkler

systems are. Every year, more than 3,000 people lose their lives in home fires, and most of those deaths are among the elderly, the disabled, the low income and the very young.”

Lia says he questions the personal motivation behind the Village trustees’ decision to abandon a perfectly sound ordinance. “In his bio on the Wheeling Village Web site Trustee Patrick Horcher says he wants to ‘guide Wheeling to a more progressive path...’ That may be, but turning back the clock on public safety is hardly the way to achieve his goal.”

<http://www.vi.wheeling.il.us/Government/BoardOfTrustees/HorcherBio.htm>)

For more information about the Northern Illinois Fire Sprinkler Advisory Board visit www.firesprinklerassoc.org.

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