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What have City officials learned since The Great Chicago Fire?

Orland Park, IL (October 4, 2004) – With the one-year anniversary of the deadly Cook County high-rise fire only days away and the annual Fire Prevention Week commemoration now underway across the nation, many local public safety advocates are shaking their heads wondering just how much Chicago has learned about fire safety.

“What is it going to take to get the City Council’s attention?” asks Tom Lia, the executive director of the Northern Illinois Fire Sprinkler Advisory Board (NIFSAB). “It’s ironic that the city whose very history is at the center of Fire Prevention Week has a high-rise fire death rate that exceeds the national average.” The Great Chicago Fire of 1871 is commemorated by Fire Prevention Week each year, in homage to the 250 lives lost in the blaze.

Last week, James Lee Witt Associates released the Final Report of the Independent Review of the Cook Country Administration Building Fire commissioned by the State of Illinois. The report confirmed what three previous reports confirm: fire sprinklers would have prevented the deaths.

According to the Witt report, inconsistencies in Building Codes were discovered such that the Municipal Code of Chicago, which is supposed to be equal to or higher than state standards were, in fact, not. The Office of the State Fire Marshal adopted NFPA Life Safety code 101 2000 Edition requiring existing high-rise buildings be equipped with fire-sprinkler systems. According to Lia, all parties just ignored the State Code.

Following the deadly Cook County high-rise fire, Mayor Richard Daley and Ald. Edward Burke (14th) introduced separate sprinkler ordinances. Daley’s ordinance requires all commercial buildings be retrofit. It does not include residential buildings and designated landmark and historical. It gives commercial buildings until 2016 to comply. Burke’s ordinance requires sprinklers in all high-rise buildings, commercial and residential. Burke’s ordinance requires fire sprinklers to be installed by 2008.

Lia says the sprinkler retrofit ordinances would better protect Chicago’s citizens from fire, yet the Building Committee is delaying a vote while it casts about for an alternative to sprinklers. “It is unlikely the Committee will find a cost-effective alternative with the life safety track record of fire sprinklers,” he adds.

Chicago remains without a high-rise fire sprinkler retrofit ordinance in place, despite the fact that repeated independent research has called for sprinklers. In 1999, approximately \$1 million was invested in the voluntary High-Rise Commission Report and found that Chicago's high-rise building fire death rate was approximately 3.5 times greater than the national average and recommended retrofitting all of the city's high-rise buildings with sprinklers within a 20 year period. Later, the City paid \$400,000 to the Tri-Data Company for a study that drew the same conclusion but within a 5 – 10 year period.

In July, the Cook County panel spent \$886,000 with the Mikva Commission and confirmed that had sprinklers been installed in the Cook County building, they would have prevented the six fatalities. This past Friday, James Lee Witt Associates spent \$1.8 million and released its findings, listing the lack of fire sprinklers as the first of four key factors that “directly contributed to fatalities” in the incident.

“In honor of Fire Prevention Week, and in tribute to the Chicago citizens whose lives were lost in the Cook County building and in fires over the years, the City should stand up for public safety this week, and take the steps to retrofit the City's high-rise buildings with automatic fire sprinklers,” Lia says. “Anything less is a clear case of denial and avoidance.”

For more than a century, automatic fire sprinklers have been proven to be the ultimate in fire protection, but they cannot help people if they aren't installed. “Each of the 800 unsprinklered high-rise buildings in Chicago is a potential major fire disaster,” Lia says. “Wouldn't it be nice if the City took the steps now to start protecting the citizens who live and work in Chicago?”

Fire Prevention Week is a time when fire departments across the country kick off a month-long effort to educate their communities about fire safety. “It's time for Chicago to take a progressive, pro-safety stance on high-rise buildings.”

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NIFSAB is a non-profit organization composed of fire officials, contractors, building officials, suppliers, architects, engineers, and manufacturers.

NIFSAB is dedicated to educating and informing the public and elected and appointed officials of the vital role that fire sprinklers play in fire protection.

For more information visit www.firesprinklerassoc.org.