



Wilmette Passes Fire Sprinkler Ordinance Due to Concerns with Lightweight Construction

Orland Park, IL (May 19, 2010) — Officials from Wilmette, Illinois, passed the village's first residential fire sprinkler ordinance requiring fire sprinklers in all new homes that are being built with lightweight construction. With the passage of this ordinance, the Village of Wilmette becomes the 67th jurisdiction in Illinois to pass residential fire sprinkler legislation.

Wilmette's residential fire sprinkler ordinance is the first occasion that a municipality or fire district has passed such an ordinance specifically over concerns with lightweight construction. For years, Wilmette has required lightweight construction commercial buildings to post placards that alert firefighters to the presence of engineered-wood trusses and joint assemblies. Now, the village is focusing on one- and two-family homes by requiring fire sprinklers after a recent study confirmed the village's suspicions about lightweight construction.

For years, members of the fire service and fire safety organizations voiced their concerns about fires in homes built with lightweight construction. In 2008, Underwriters Laboratories[®] (UL) conducted a study to understand the hazards to firefighters posed by use of lightweight wood trusses and engineered lumber in residential roof and floor designs. The findings indicated that dimensional lumber construction withstood the fire tests longer than lightweight engineered wood systems. Therefore, firefighters who may expect 30 minutes of structural integrity with dimensional wood structures will face potential peril in lightweight structures. Additionally, the study found that the synthetic construction of today's home furnishings add to the increased risk by providing a greater fuel load.

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Add One

With the now-confirmed shortened amount of time for homeowners to exit their homes and for firefighters to fight fire, the Village of Wilmette felt it was necessary to take a stance to protect the community and its firefighters. In fact, the village also passed an ordinance for commercial buildings requiring fire sprinklers in all new construction, regardless of square footage, and is currently researching ways to improve its high-rise fire safety ordinances.

“New homes being built in Wilmette today are very large with open floor plans, which allow smoke and fire to travel throughout the home. In addition, the majority of new homes are built with lightweight wood trusses or engineered components which have proven to fail very quickly during fire conditions. Add to this, new contents and furnishings that burn five to six times hotter and faster than material made prior to 1970 and we have a very dangerous situation,” said Wilmette Fire Chief James Dominik.

Wilmette recognized the fire problems over ten years ago as part of its community risk assessment. Dominik states that this endeavor did not happen overnight and is a result of hundreds of hours of work and research. Wilmette relied on several people and organizations for support including Underwriters Laboratories (UL), the National Fire Sprinkler Association (NFSA), the Northern Illinois Fire Sprinkler Advisory Board (NIFSAB) and NIFSAB Executive Director Tom Lia, the Home Fire Sprinkler Coalition (HFSC), the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA), and especially local real estate agents, builders, insurance professionals and village trustees.

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Add Two

“Together we made a difference and the legacy will pay off for decades. We will not be able to comprehend the impact until that first fire where the residents walk out of the house wet instead of being carried to the burn unit or the morgue,” said Wilmette Deputy Fire Chief Mike McGreal.

With the rising issues regarding fire safety in lightweight construction, the unprecedented fire sprinkler ordinance in Wilmette is likely the first of many similar ordinances to come in the State of Illinois.

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Source: Northern IL Fire Sprinkler Advisory Board.

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.