

HAVE WE GONE TOO FAR FOR COST VS. SAFETY?

By: Mike Ashley

What is the purpose of our codes? Pick up a code book and in the first chapter you will find something that reads like, the purpose of this code is to establish the minimum requirements for the health of everyone and to have safe pathways to exit, sanitation, light, ventilation, conserve energy, and protect life and property from fire, and to provide safety to firefighters and others that respond during emergency operations.

Let's look at three parts of the intent of the code in reference to safety of life, property damage from fire, and safety of fire fighters and emergency responders. First, look at the construction of buildings and the lack of redundancy in backing up the automatic sprinkler systems. In multiple occupant buildings the adjacent tenant is put in danger every time a problem occurs on the other side of the tenant separation without the redundant, passive protection in place that would help keep the fire and smoke in the space where the problem occurs.

Second, let's relate this to life safety issues. This lack of redundancy is placing lives in danger. The redundancy for fire walls, smoke barriers, and dampers are a major part of the total construction. This combination is needed to provide for the maximum safety of lives both for the occupants of the building and the emergency personal that work in that building on any given day. In a recent USA Today article, it was stated that from 1998 – 2005, there was an approximate 84% increase in college housing fires. From 2002 through 2005 there were 39 deaths and approximately 400 injuries due to these fires. Could redundancy in fire protection have lowered these numbers? We will never know. What we do know is when inspecting after a fire incident where a fire wall and smoke barriers were present and installed properly, one could see a substantial difference in the spread of heat and smoke. This saves lives and reduces the number of injuries.

When means of egress are compromised, so are lives. A third part of the intent of all building and fire codes is the means of egress both for occupants and emergency personnel. Without the protection by the redundant systems, the egress pathways can be compromised by smoke and fire. This endangers the occupant in his escape and the emergency personnel in their efforts to rescue occupants and to protect the property. The lack of redundancy is reducing construction cost but at what price to human lives?

Many of the voting fire and building code officials have let the influence of the builder/developer get our attention. Code officials have been told to consider costs when proposing a code change. Cost should not be a concern of the code official. Safety should be their concern. The builders/developers say they cannot afford to build the building if they have to have fire walls, dampers, smoke management systems and all the redundancy built into the building. The builder/developer has also gotten into the big box compartments without regard to the safety of the emergency personal that will have to work in that environment trying to save both lives and property. Both emergency personal and occupants need to ask themselves the question, "Do I want to support code that puts me in a more comprising situation so that the building owner can make a larger profit due to lower construction cost?"

Construction costs have steadily risen and will continue to do so. Safety issues are at the forefront in all aspects of our lives. Airbags add to the cost of automobiles. Fire retardant added to the cost of children's pajamas. GPS adds cost to the operation of airlines. All of these add protection to the consumer by increasing their safety. The construction industry has to understand the need for multiple fire protection features, not compromise when it comes to fire protection features.

As we work into a new code cycle we must not let testimony that refers to cost sway our decisions. We must get back to the intent of the code, which is to provide for the safety of life, protection of property, and to provide the emergency responders a safer work environment. Remember, the incident scene is the work environment for the emergency personal. Stop and think about it. Whether it is a firefighter or a first responder to a medical emergency or your family member going into a local structure, the building should be as safe as possible. It is our job to ensure that the building is as safe as possible. It is time to turn the concern of the code making process to safety, not to the builder's bottom line.

Mike Ashley C.B.O. and Fire Marshal is now serving as executive director for the Alliance for Fire & Smoke Containment & Control, Inc.