



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

Cookin Bull Frogs

There is a story they tell about cooking bullfrogs that has to do with bringing about change. Rumor has it that if take a live bullfrog and throw it in pot of boiling water it won't stay in there long enough to even be hurt. Instantaneously the bullfrog realizes it is a dangerous environment and will bolt out of that pot as quick as possible. Unless you clamp the lid down real tight you are never going to keep the bullfrog in there. However, if you take the bullfrog and place him in lukewarm water and set him on a stovetop and raise the degree of that water by one degree every minute or so the bullfrog will literally stay in the hot water until they are cooked.

This metaphor has often been used to describe how long it takes to bring about change. Rapid change doesn't really work well in a fire community. Rapid change, or white water change, as some people are prone to call it, is a tumultuous chaotic experience for many. In fact rapid change often results in absolutely formable resistance to change.

I have born witness to this phenomenon throughout most of my career. I was involved initially with some of the concepts of change clear back in the 1960's when there was a group of fire chiefs who wanted to change the way that things were done in our particular area. The old timers (and the old dinosaurs as we used to call them) were quick to point out almost every single thing wrong with almost every change that was being brought forward. Yet, nonetheless those changes did occur and they created the contemporary fire service that we all take for granted today.

Things haven't always been the way they are right now. As a matter of fact we have been cooking bullfrogs now for about forty years. The changes that have been introduced in the fire service that have been the most successful have been incremental and perceived to be essentially non threatening at the stage that they were at any point in time. Yet, they have substantially changed America's fire problem.

This is a magazine about sprinklers. So I thought I might apply the bullfrog principle to the field of sprinkler protection. Are we in a different place right now then we were in 1960? I not only think we are not only in a different place but we are going even a more distant place at sometime in the future.

The automatic fire sprinkler system is a stronger member of the inventory of the average fire departments means of mitigating fire practices today than it ever has been in the history of the fire service. I believe that that statement is irrefutable. Yet, many organizations that have that advantage simply do not wish to recognize it nor do they want to base the majority of their fire defense systems on that reality. In fact sprinklers are encroaching upon fire problems at a rate that has been unparallel in the past. All of this is going on at exactly the same time but there are people who still are resisting the installation of sprinklers in certain sets of circumstances.



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I can go back to 1971 in the City of San Clemente. I was told by a City Manager when I assumed command of that department that I was going to be challenged to develop a mechanism of protecting that city when it was going to experience explosive growth. Simultaneous with that challenge was the admonition that I had to find a way to keep the cost of the fire department within certain parameters of the budget. My mechanism of choice was the residential sprinkler system. At that time there was no thing as a “residential sprinkler system”. In my previous experience working for Costa Mesa we had been putting sprinkler systems in hotels and motels to reduce fire flow impact on the department. The resistance to that concept in the early 70’s was for the lack of a better term, “aggressive”. Yet, the City of San Clemente did pass the first residential sprinkler ordinance and the rest as they say has become history. Today there are hundreds of communities that have embraced the residential sprinkler technology.

Industry has modified its performance parameters to come up with sprinklers that are more responsive to the residential environment. Yet, if you walk in many communities today and walk up to the roster at the City Council or Board of Trustees meeting and announce that you are going to propose a residential sprinkler ordinance you are going to see the same type of aggressive resistance.

In spite of all that, sprinkler technology has continued to grow incrementally for a wide variety of reasons. The bullfrog analogy is not about confrontation. Instead it is about making incremental changes in the community with regard to using sprinkler technology to start whittling away at specific fire problems one at a time. Some of you who are reading this column will remember when an automatic sprinkler system was looked upon as something usually found in warehouses and factories and nowhere else.

Today, we can find the sprinkler system in shopping centers, pet stores, restaurants, hotels and motels, schools, residences and I have even seen examples of automatic sprinkler systems put in to protect high valued livestock in barns. That is a lot of bullfrog cooking.

As of the writing of this column there are several pieces of legislation going on in the state of California that have to do with putting sprinkler systems in all schools that are under construction or are going to be remodeled. Based upon the absolutely significant amount of school fires that have occurred in the state legislature is now currently considering putting those systems in as part of the assuring that state funding will support that schools existence. According to the proponents of this particular bill this legislation is land mark legislation when it comes to educational institutions. On the other hand one might consider it just raising the temperature in the bullfrog pot by another degree.

If you are a chief officer in an authority having jurisdiction and are not using sprinkler technology to its greatest possibility yet you have several courses of action to consider. The obvious one of course is to



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try to make your local codes and ordinances more restrictive requiring sprinklers in a broader range of occupancies. You and I both know that is going to be a pitched battle. There are people already lined up to go visit your boss and your elected officials telling them just how crazy you are.

The second strategy is to pursue the development of sprinkler requirements in our model codes. The degree to which we succeed at this is of immense value in reducing conflict at the local level. The limitation to this process is that in our community of fire and building officials expanding sprinkler requirements at the model code level requires an intensive amount of justification and a considerable amount of political skills in expanding those requirements. Nonetheless, all one has to do is look at the codes today and realize how much different they are from the fire code of the 1970's.

But there is a third strategy that needs to be considered by authorities having jurisdiction. That strategy is to soften the target. What I am referring to here is to continually develop mechanisms within your organizations that are increasing the possibility that any particular event could lead to an improvement in sprinkler requirement. I have often heard this referred to as ordinance by opportunity. It is another way of describing the catastrophic theory or reform. In essence what I am saying is that you shouldn't wait until something happens to take advantage of it, you should anticipate it and have a plan of operation under way.

One of the best examples that I can give you of how to approach the softening of the target is to look at some of the documents that are currently available for authorities having jurisdiction. The National Fire Sprinkler Association through the efforts of Mr. Steve Hart have developed a manual that can be given to the authority having jurisdiction to start the initial educational and awareness project long before a person even proposes a sprinkler technology solution. This document can be obtained from AHJ's by going to the website of NFSA.org and downloading the manual to your own desktop.

They say that luck favors the mind prepared. That is exactly what I am proposing here. If you are among the fire departments out there that have zero based ordinances this is unlikely to mean much to you. On the other hand if you are a fire prevention bureau that is just barely keeping even with the growth of your fire problem and you are looking for a potential use of sprinkler systems to be part of your inventory of mitigation practices, then you should obtain a copy of that book and read it. It shouldn't be one of those kinds of books that sit on the shelf. Instead it should permeate the group dynamic process in your fire prevention bureau as well as be a pivotal part of community outreach as you develop ongoing support for modern fire prevention practices.

I am a firm believer that this concept has merit. In my past I have frequently told the story of the bullfrog analogy to members of my staff as a mechanism of getting them to understand that it takes a long time to be an overnight success. One of my staff members openly got the point and gave me a ceramic bullfrog, which still sits on my desk today. If you follow through maybe you will get lucky too.