



# ***CHIEF'S FILE CABINET***

*Ronny J. Coleman*

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## **Fire Protection is Good Business**

Why does the fire department exist? You can find that question answered in almost every community that has a fire department. Usually it will be expressed in terms of our job is to save lives and property. That is such a common goal that it is often expressed in the mission statements and, in some cases, emblazoned on badges, shoulder patches, and logos on sides of fire trucks.

The secondary question is how are we going to save lives and property? Conventional wisdom in the past was that fire suppression was the tool of choice. Granted, there have been schools of thought that have argued that point ranging all the way from some who offered built-in fire protection as “the ultimate solution” to those who believe that public education and fire prevention are the tools of choice.

If we take a careful look at what has happened over the last few decades we can see that each of these tools have had their impact and it is also clear that no single one of these have provided the ultimate solution. We still have major fires in spite of education and code enforcement. All one has to do is look at something like Oakland or the Painted Cave fire in Santa Barbara and realize that our fire suppression capability is still being called out to deal with a maximum effort. All the lesson plans on public education and all the code books in the world mean little when conflagration is raging.

But we are also facing another dilemma. The preservation of public resources for fire protection has eroded in the last decade. Public support for the fire service is often more linked to their emergency medical services function than it is to firefighting capability and the fire service is frequently under attack from those who are attempting to reduce public expenditures.

So let's go back to the basic premise at the beginning of this article. What does a fire department exist for? It is to protect the lives and property of the community. I would like to expand that definition to say that a fire department also exists to protect the economic viability of a community. Good fire protection is good for the business community. There are a lot of people who would argue with that. Not uncommonly, the budget analysts and the community watchdog groups look upon fire protection like an insurance policy rather than a part of the team keeping the community viable.

To be real specific, the fire service, in its efforts to maintain staffing levels in fire stations, has often found itself in conflict with community groups that would rather see a park built than keep a fire station open. The issue of law enforcement and the overall feeling of insecurity on the part of society has resulted in billions being dumped into law enforcement while fire chiefs often face a hostile reaction to doing such things as adding additional personnel, improving code enforcement stance, or expanding on a training and education program.



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We have not done a very good job of clearly establishing in the minds of our business community the fact that a fire department is part of the infrastructure that keeps them in business. Fire strikes so randomly and so infrequently that in many communities the only interaction between the business community and the fire department is at two points. First and foremost is their expectation that when they dial the emergency number they expect a fire truck. The second point of contact is when we attempt to enforce fire prevention codes and ordinances and find ourselves facing a hostile business relationship because almost everything we ask them to do costs them money.

This simply does not have to be so. It is incumbent on the part of the fire service to reach out to the business community and help them identify the fact that good fire protection is good for business. One of the ways of doing that is by establishing a working relationship with the business community and I'm not just talking about a social relationship. I am talking about a business relationship.

Almost all communities have some form of Chamber of Commerce or industrial committee or redevelopment committee who is monitoring the economic vitality of that jurisdiction. It is very important that fire service leaders seek these people out and spend some time developing a dialogue regarding what fire protection is really all about.

There are lots of things that should be talked about. For example, I once did a study in a town where I discovered that one particular building generated something like 40% of the sales tax revenue to the community. In addition, this one single building provided employment for a very large percentage of the town. That single fire risk, if it was destroyed, would have crippled the economic capabilities in the community. Focusing your time and attention on the manager of such a facility and discussing the rationale for why built-in fire protection and engine company concentration and distribution are important for his livelihood is not an exercise to be overlooked.

To the contrary, it is very important that this individual be an ally. They need to fully understand the reason why the alarm system needs to go into the dispatch center. Discussions of the element of time and the impact upon firefighting operations of proper storage practices, etc., all have their place in this kind of dialogue. The result of conducting this kind of evaluation of a community and establishing relationships with the business community is that fire protection would then be looked upon not as an expenditure but as an investment. Frankly, the fire service is doing a very poor job of convincing the business community that we are anything but a tax drain. The longer the business community holds that myth regarding the fire service, the longer the process of erosion will continue.

This type of effort requires some outreach on the part of the fire service. The business community is not going to come to us. We must go to it. We must start taking a look at our communities, not as merely collections of people and buildings, but as subsystems. The subsystems consist of buildings that are



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occupied in which life is the primary issue and buildings which are utilized as part of the business and industrial complex or community. Granted, some of these same buildings also contain lives which can be endangered by fire.

If we go back and look at some of the early work done with master planning, there were some excellent approaches suggested in there regarding risk assessment and the community. Unfortunately, many fire departments took the point of view that this kind of in-depth analysis was unnecessary. I think we are reaping the consequences of that oversight today.

Establishing a strong working relationship with an organization such as the Chamber of Commerce has a certain degree of political sensitivity to it. Obviously, one cannot put themselves in a position of pinning the business community against the policy makers in the community such as city councils and boards of supervisors. The emphasis in this relationship should not be on leveraging one group against the other. Instead, the focus should be on the education process of getting people to be extremely aware of the relationship between good fire protection and a viable business community.

There are many techniques that can be utilized to accomplish this aim. Among the simplest is for the fire department to get involved in the Chamber's business activities. Participating in their industrial committees, joining with them on economic development teams and assisting them in projects of locating and relocating businesses are all techniques that strengthen that relationship.

The reverse can also be true. Fire departments can open their doors to members of the business community and share with them what is really going on. For example, in one department they hold an annual open house which is focused on the Chamber of Commerce and their industrial committee. The group is asked to come to the firehouse for a dinner which consists of "fire house chili" and they are given an opportunity to go through the fire station and look at the resources, discuss various fire prevention programs and, in general, become more acquainted with each other. In actuality, seldom is a community totally crippled by the loss of a single occupancy. This is probably an anomaly that many communities can honestly say they can avoid merely because of the diversity of their business community. This column is not suggesting that we use scare tactics to get people to believe in the fire department. We are merely suggesting that if we wish to find some friends to support our contention that good fire protection requires a certain amount of resources, the best way to obtain those friends is to communicate with them before we ask someone to ante up for the tab.

Contemporary budgeting procedures in most communities clearly indicate that the support for fire protection is a combination of property tax, sales tax, and a whole host of fees and permits, most of which are generated by the business community. It follows that if there is no business, there are no bucks. To protect our interest we must protect theirs.