



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

How Much For The Doggie In The Window?

Have you ever had a song whose lyrics keep popping up in your mind and you can't seem to eliminate them. Yep, I have one of those. It was a jingo-ish type of tune sung many; many years ago entitled "How Much Is That Doggie in the Window?" What infuriates me about the tune is the fact that I didn't really like it at the time but the lyrics are frozen in some brain cell deeply embedded in my brain.

I do know one thing. Doggies were a lot cheaper to buy in 1955 in which I seem to recall as the era when that song first landed on the hit parade. If you go downtown to buy a dog today, especially if that mutt has a pure breed certificate with it, it is liable to cost you more than what people used to make with a whole months wages.

Economics are funny that way. Things cost. And when things cost a lot, fewer people have them. What has that all got to do with fire prevention? This was brought to my attention in some recent work regarding particular code provisions that had some pretty significant economic impact on a building. I think most fire prevention types are clearly aware of the fact that most code provisions have a price tag. However, what is often missing from that discussion is whether or not the cost actually results in the benefit to be derived.

For this reason I think it is all together appropriate that we in the fire community become much more knowledgeable about the cost factors associated with our code requirements. Before you start running out to get your contractor's license by becoming knowledgeable on construction costs, let me state that I am not suggesting that this be so complicated that it slows down the process. To the contrary, I think it is all together appropriate that we in the code regulation business need to converse with the contracting community to find out exactly what cost factors look like from their perspective. That means asking questions. That means paying attention instead of just walking away from a decision to require something.

I will also be the first to admit that this may not be an easy dialogue to develop. In my many years of serving in the fire service I have had some pretty heated – make that volatile – conversations with both developers and contractors over code requirements. It has always been my perspective however, that sometimes it is better to listen and learn than it is to require and defend.

I believe the way that we can develop this dialogue is to engage in periodic conversations with those who are doing the jobs that we are out there to either approve or disapprove. It could start off with nothing more than a question of "how much does it cost to do that?"



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

Or, it could be as complex as actually having discussions about the incremental costs and overall budgets for projects so that you can get a perspective on all of that.

This may not work well if you have got a hostile work environment already. I strongly suggest that if you have got somebody who pounding his fist on his desk about a code requirement they are probably not very willing to share information with you. Therefore it is important that we in the regulatory field become more conversant with the other side of the arena by going to visit them. In other columns I have alluded to being involved in Chamber of Commerce meetings, working with contractors associations, even being aboard aircraft with some individuals who were outright angry at the fire service.

The nature of this concept is to not be confrontational as much as you need to be conversational.

Trust is an interesting concept. You cannot get it unless you begin to give it. One of my old contemporary's Fire Chief Dave Hilton from Cobb County Georgia was one of the leading experts in working closely with his developmental community. His slow, patient, but pervasive attitude led him to many a solution in which he became as knowledgeable on the cost factors of putting sprinklers in apartment houses as the very people who were putting them in.

Obviously we don't want to go too far with this concept. You are not in the business of not making decisions just because it costs too much. What I am referring to is the fact that if you make a decision that has a cost factor, you need to be very aware that if your interpretation is a little shaky the dollars and sense will often give you a sense of perspective.

And it is not intended that this concept get you all teary eyed about how much you are costing somebody to build buildings. Construction is an investment that is going to appreciate. Fire and Building code requirements are part of the insurance that the building will survive long enough to obtain appreciation. All I am suggesting that we need to level the playing field so that we are much more knowledgeable about what we are doing in a community that only respects those who are at the top of their game.

I once remember a quote suggested by a friend of mine from finance that economists are people who knew the price of everything but the value of nothing. A good person involved in fire protection planning needs to know the value of everything that they request, but knowledgeable about the cost also.

One suggested way to look at this whole area is to become familiar with the concept of square footage cost figures. Contractors are pretty accustomed to using this form of short hand to discuss installation costs. I have used it in the field of sprinkler installation for many years myself. It is easily



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

calculated by taking the total costs of a specific element and dividing it by the square footage involved to arrive at an estimate. For example, right this moment – how much does it cost in your community to install a commercial fire sprinkler system in a commercial building? If you already know you are ahead of the curve. If you aren't sure, it could be something that would improve your ability to communicate on the issue. If you don't know and don't care to know, this could be a sign of the possible conflicts that will be in the future of you discussions with your contactors and developers.

Then, of course, there is the other aspect of fire prevention that bears on the economic consideration. What about the fact that that a specific code provision may result in a lower insurance premium for a building too? That too is a cost element that can be made part of the equation.

For example if a commercial building is going to be constructed without a sprinkler system it will be looked at as one type of risk. If it is constructed with a sprinkler system, it becomes a different type of risk. The resulting difference in costs between the two can be significant over time. Fire Marshals are not required to become insurance agents, but I can tell you that understanding of that relationship is important to understand the economics of the built-in measures.

Lastly, there is a cost factor that everyone hates to hear from the fire service. What happens if we do not put in a system that is needed because of economic impact and the inevitable happens: a fire occurs. City Managers often refer to this as the fire departments “gloom and doom – burning alive in your bed speech. But, it is true that much of the justification of our current code is wrapped up in catastrophic experiences of the past. Need we be reminded of the Coconut Gove fire, Our Lady of Angels, the First Interstate Bank Building, etc? These are real world costs of failing to use a technology or not recognizing the value of a technology in a high-risk scenario.

As I was preparing this article I received an internet memo from one of the Chiefs Associations that sort of sets an example of this phenomenon. It involved a fire in the Disneyland hotel. It involved a fire that began about 3:00 Am in the 745 room hotel. It prompted the evacuation of the entire hotel. The article, which was only one page long sort of sputtered along about the fact that the tree was a fake tree, that the alarm system forced everyone to leave and go out in the cold, and that, in a passing mention, the sprinkler system was activated, and sure the fire department showed up to put out the remains of the fire. Most of the article had to do with the fact that the hotel management had to provide robes and slippers and hot chocolate to the guests. Ho-Hum. Back page news.

Well, compare that story with the Winnecoff Hotel fire, or the MGM Grand in Las Vegas from the pages of the history books and you can see that there is a cost to be calculated. One of the inconvenienced guests in the Disneyland hotel was heard to utter that “ they took very good care of us” Little did that guest know that the person that really took care of him was a plan checker and a field inspector that



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

made sure all of that stuff was in place and working right when the fire occurred. And there was cost to the taxpayers to provide that service also.

The bottom line to all of this discussion is that we are gradually making the world a safer place by investing in fire protection all of the time. Some of the costs are being borne by the developers of projects. Some by the contractors and the business owners. Some is borne by the taxpayers in the form of providing the rules and regulations that create the costs.

But, the greatest cost of all is failure to do all of that. It is paid by the victims of the failure of the system. Would you want to bet that they would have paid to provide the right stuff in the right place to prevent their tragedy from happening. I bet they would

So, while I cannot get the tune of "How Much is that Doggie in the Window" out of my head. So too, you are not likely to get rid of the fact that almost everything you ask a building owner to do is going to cost. It is a way of doing business and the true bottom line is the quality of life that is provided by the mutual investment into adequate fire protection by the community and the property owners.