



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

Forrest Gump in the Bureau

I don't know if there is a single human being in the world that hasn't seen the movie "Forrest Gump". There are quotations used all the time in idle conversation that came out that movie. Has anybody ever forgotten "life is like a box of chocolate"? The movie made simple observations into world class clichés. I had the opportunity the other day to see a statement that sort of fall into that category. I will even tell you where it was. I was visiting a fire department in the Bay Area in California. It was the Fremont Fire Department. Some of you who know me may recall that I spent some time there as an interim chief. I particularly like going back to that department to visit because of the nature of the culture of the organization that I enjoy.

However, that is not the cliché I am talking about. The fire chief took me into a newly remodeled portion of the headquarters. There are a couple of display cases that he had delegated to the different divisions to decorate as part of the theme as you enter the building. That is when I observed a saying that I think is priceless.

The fire prevention bureau had built a display that says "remember! Initial attack starts with fire prevention." How profound. I was totally unable to find out who actually coined the phrase. I am not sure that they actually coined it themselves. But I do know that they put it in their display cases. I don't know a better cliché to explain the validity of why fire prevention is part of the arsenal of a modern and competent fire department. Without a fire prevention bureau, many of the things that we take for granted in buildings would simply not exist or begin to deteriorate to the point where they might as well not exist. Everybody in fire suppression owes a debt of gratitude to a plan checker to make sure the access to the building is correct. Every fire pump operator owes a debt of gratitude to a plan checker who made sure that the fire hydrants were within the right distance to the building and/or are protected from damage.

Every captain that has to force entry into a building and is provided with a key box on the outside of the building should be appreciative. I could go on and on about the components of a building but the simple fact is that 90 percent of built in fire protection is there because somebody in the bureau made sure it was there and made sure it continues to operate.

In other columns I have mentioned a term called "graceful degradation". I would like to raise it here as part of the phenomenon that fire prevention bureaus are being exposed to here today. Many communities find that it is reasonable for them to start eliminating fire prevention personnel because they lack new growth in development. That is a shame. Because no matter what you put into a building twenty years ago, it may not be there when you return if you don't inspect it on a routine regular basis. Many fire departments have down scaled or for that matter even eliminated their company fire inspection programs. That means that many of the opportunities for degradation that were caught by



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fire suppression companies are now being allowed to exist because there is no one else to go in and look. It is a statement of fact that in most communities the building department has never looked at a building once it is completed unless it is a tenant improvement. A fire code is a maintenance code. Maintenance means visitation. Visitation means staff commitment.

To reiterate a phrase of one of our patron fire chiefs Benjamin Franklin, “a penny saved is a penny earned.” By eliminating fire prevention personnel to make sure that those built in devices are there functioning we may well be saving pennies and wasting dollars.

A fire officer responding in a million dollar fire truck to a building that is almost booby trapped with failing fire prevention mechanisms is on the wrong path.

I didn't get a chance to talk to the bureau that day when I was visiting with the fire chief. Hopefully this column will be read by many other fire prevention bureaus. Hopefully it will give you the support you need to remember that you too are part of initial attack. America's fire problems are made better, one inspection at a time, while fire loss is made worse, one violation at a time.

The longer we are all building to be in existence without someone taking a close look at the mechanisms that were put in there to protect it, the closer we are to the next firefighter injury or mortality.