



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

The Future of Fire Prevention

Does anybody remember when the fire code could almost fit in your hip pocket? I was fortunate to begin my fire service career when there were some of the pioneers in the field of fire code development working to create a document called the Uniform Fire Code. The most notable among those names was Robert Gain. He was a fire chief with Downey Fire Department and a man who was probably 30 years ahead of his time. What he saw; his vision as it were, was a very bright future for fire prevention.

Let's compare that today with all of the books, publications, documents, etc that we have that are part of the fire prevention arena and see how far we have gone with them. No one can doubt that there has been a proliferation of interpretation. Nobody can doubt that hasn't been the raising of the bar. As a matter of fact, if I were to look at the amount of documentation now associated with fire prevention compared to some of those original documents are like the difference between day light and darkness.

Unfortunately I do not have a lot of statistics to back up my opinion but I would like to make this one observation. Over the last 25 years, things have gotten better with respect to fire losses. Now, I am not talking about line of duty deaths that still hover at a level that is unacceptable to the American fire service. I am not even talking about the total number of dollars that have been consumed and lost as a result of increases in fire problems since the urban wildland interface has turned into such a mess. Instead what I am focusing on is the fact that our fire codes are now making a safer America.

Certain occupancies that used to be problematic have now gone to the back burner. For example, we have made considerable amounts of progress in reducing the amount of commercial fires that occur on an annual basis. Fire sprinklers, compartmentalization and perhaps to a significant degree, the training and education of business managers in the necessity for fire prevention is working.

And while we still lament the fact that the single family dwelling is our most frequent site for loss of life, the fact is that there are hundreds of thousands of homes today, including apartment houses in which fire sprinklers, smoke detectors and departmentalization are working to reduce fire losses. Some parts of the country have opted out of this strategy and they will pay dearly for that omission in the future.

In the opening statement in this column we talked about the future of fire prevention. Can we expect the fire code to continue to expand in terms of being comprehensive or are we about to reach a point where it is going to have to level off? I fully realize that this is somewhat of a philosophical question. This is because there are those that might wish to see either of those agenda's continued. Those that see the fire code becoming more and more comprehensive are probably going to face an increasing battle over cost and benefit. That those that want to see the fire code more simplified are likely to face an ongoing battle about retrenchment.



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It begs the question of when are we going to develop leaders in fire prevention over the next couple of decades. Where are those people right now? Are they languishing in fire stations waiting for a career opportunity to move over to the bureau? Or, are they sitting in classrooms earning degrees on fire protection engineering so that they can either represent the private sector or the governmental sector? Moreover, are there people out there that don't even know that they have a future in fire prevention because right now they are focused with getting a job in the fire department?

If I were a betting person, I would bet on the fact that the body of knowledge in fire prevention is going to be significantly increased over the next couple of decades and those who master the future of fire problems are going to be more valuable than those paid to react to them. Granted a significant part of America's fire problem is already planted firmly on the ground. It is called our existing building stock.

In giving advice to various communities about risk assessment. I often play a little game of analyzing the age of the construction in comparison to contemporary problems the department faces. For examples, how many know what a Craftsman home is? About what stage in construction did buildings actually begin to incorporate lightweight wood products? How many of America's fire problems have been eradicated through redevelopment processes? In essence the fire problem is becoming more and more focused through the application of the fire and building codes.

The two people that are probably going to shape America's fire problem in the future are the fire officials and the building officials. This is where the ground rules are best evaluated.

As I observe the economic conditions, I am convinced that modern fire protection is having an effect on the economics of fire. Each and every year, more and more money is being devoted to built-in fire protection as opposed investing in the growth of manual fire suppression forces. I do not say this as a contradiction in terms by the development of the size of fire departments but rather the recognition that risk mitigation as an overall strategy is easier to support than risk suppression.

Many of the philosophical shifts that are occurring are things such as Vision 20/20 and the idea of community risk reduction is having impact on the ground.

If you want to engage in a debate about the future of fire prevention you will have people tell you that America has a legacy fire problem that is huge. I agree with that. If you go back to some of historical records you will realize that much of our downtown infrastructure was created in the late 1800s up to the early 1900s. There is always a possibility that those buildings are a very serious risk management problem to communities. Non conforming legacy buildings need protection in a different fashion that the more modern versions of the same occupancy. It is a natural phenomenon of growth and development.



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My recommendation is that those of you that are at the rank of chief officer, and are anticipating a future of anywhere of 10 – 15 years of continued involvement that you pay very close attention to what is going on in the community development process. You are the ones that need to be the expert on product acceptance developments through the ICC Evaluation Services. You are the ones that need to be aware of what is going on with code amendments at the international code level. The consequence of ignoring all of these is that the fire problem is going to become somebody else's responsibility instead of the fire services. As I examine the economic interest behind much of what is being done in fire protection today, I believe that the "ounce of prevention" of philosophy is bearing a benefit to many communities.

If you are a fire marshal reading this article, you might have a smile on your face right now because you realize that you are already the architect of the future for your agency. If you are fire chief you might have a combination of a perplexed look on your face trying to balance out this philosophical discussion with the reality that your budget is under attack almost constantly over the manual firefighting component. I am not suggesting that we abandon one for the other in any way. To the contrary, I am focusing on the fact that seeking balance in developing our community fire problems may provide us with potential solutions for how to be more adequately prepared for a manual fire suppression problems of the future.

I am of the opinion that this balancing act is going to go on for the next hundred years. We don't intend to replace our cities in totality. But we are going to redevelop them and we are going expand them. Anybody that thinks that the techniques that got us to where we are today and will take us to where we want to be tomorrow is being misled. Prevention and risk reduction are not hypothetical concepts. They are capable of changing our culture and our society. If you don't think I am right, then you tell me what a PTD is and how will it impact your community sometime in the future?