



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

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Give Me a Break; Where Do You Draw the Line?

If you really want to see someone upset at a construction site, look for two sets of circumstances. The first of these is when an installer has put in something that a fire inspector has refused to accept. The second of these is when a fire inspector finds a condition at the scene of an installation that is contradictory to the plans and they must have a conflict with the installer.

Basically, no one wants to find themselves in a confrontation. Generally speaking, the average person will do everything in their power to avoid having to go nose to nose and eyeball to eyeball with another individual if it is at all possible. Yet, conflict between installers and inspectors is a phenomenon that occurs frequently in the field. Why? With the possible exception of someone who deliberately goes out of their way to create conflict, the vast majority of problems between authority having jurisdiction and installers has to do with a simple phrase; a failure to communicate.

A friend of mine has a plaque in his office which shows an individual with a very frustrated look on his face, pulling his hair out, and the caption reads, "Oh no, you did it the way I told you instead of the way I meant!" Many years ago, I recall a circumstance where one of my own fire inspectors had to go to the site of a residential sprinkler installation and have an entire system torn out because it was improperly installed. Talk about conflict!

How in the world do these things happen? More importantly, how in the world can we make sure they never happen? The relationship between an inspector and an installation company has some very specific implications that are not found within codes and standards, nor are they found in ordinances. Among these is the fact that there is an inherent liability in the installation of a system that is almost equally shared between the inspector and the installer. Failure to comply with standards and to install a system that may not perform under actual fire conditions could jeopardize both inspector and installer. Whenever an incident occurs where a standard is allowed to be modified under field conditions and/or a person is granted an exception to an installation criterion, the liability issue begins to widen and embrace both installer and enforcer.

The opposite of this relationship is one in which standards are rigidly adhered to in spite of the fact that common sense tells us to do otherwise. Rigidity and inflexibility in the enforcement of installation standards can often result in some positively ludicrous circumstances occurring in the field. Just how do we achieve a quality control balance between enforcers and installers that protects both groups' interests?

First and foremost, we need to take a look at what an enforcing agency should be doing at the very outset of its enforcement cycle. Adopting the ordinances and standards and placing them in the books of the agency is only step 1. Contrary to the popular concept that both of these documents, i.e.,



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standards and ordinances, are clearly understood by installation firms, there is a broad gap that must be breached in order to assure adequate communications.

Many fire departments have taken an additional step of preparing what is referred to as “code enforcement standards”. These documents are specific outlines of exactly how the fire department or enforcing agency intends to enforce standards and ordinances that are in legislation. These documents often include specific processes that must be followed in getting permits issued, conducting the plan checking process, and any special interpretations that may be required because of local demographics and/or structural conditions.

Code enforcement standards do not repeat what is already documented in nationally recognized documents such as NFPA 13, 13D, 13R, and the other respective standards. Nor do they repeat the sections of the legislation that adopts building codes or other amendments. This document addresses the quote “how to” so that both the installer and the enforcing officer know what is expected before a single solitary piece of pipe has ever been joined in the construction of a sprinkler system. They define what is acceptable or unacceptable in a local context. Further, this type of documentation is often shared with the company that is doing business well before they have even entered into the plan development process.

The next step of a good quality control plan has to do with plan checking. All sprinkler plans have to be checked and reviewed, however the degree to which the plans are a reflection of what actually occurs in the field may be a foundation for conflict between the inspector and the installer. A good plan checker will be as specific as possible about the inconsistencies that are observed on a set of plans and what they expect the plans to reflect as built. A properly set of marked up plans will not only include approvals of specific installations but will also include recommendations for modifications that must come back and be reviewed by the plan checker before final approval. Any fire department, or any plan checker, that fails to give some degree of direction for modifications may well expect to receive subsequent changes that still do not comply with the intent of the code.

The relationship between the enforcement agency and the installer of fire protection devices is a symbiotic one. If the relationship is good, both prosper. If the relationship is bad they both suffer. It is virtually impossible for the relationship to be one-sided, with one element winning over the other.

The development of code enforcement standards and the establishment of a well organized plan checking process are best developed as a joint project also. For example, when I was working on a problem with copper pipe in residential sprinkler the best information I obtained came from one of the installers that was part of the discussions. I know that other fire chiefs have had similar experiences. Chief Dave Hilton in Cobb County has told me of several incidents where the communications between his department and the construction industry avoided unnecessary conflict.



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Granted, the implementation of both of these processes has elements of governmental authority. At some time in the process someone has to be in charge and make the decisions. The terminology of the codes and ordinances most often place this burden on the authority having jurisdiction...It is unlikely to be changed in the future, but the process can always be improved to reflect the combined strengths of a good enforcement program by the authority with a good quality control program of the sprinkler industry. The real winners are the individuals who will be protected by those systems for years to come.