



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

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Greetings and Salutations;
Partners, Buddies and Pals

A common greeting that came out of the old west was, "Howdy, partner." It was intended to be a form of greeting used between friends or potential friends. The inference was that if you were willing to serve with someone in a partnering role, and you learned how to share and work together, you would both benefit from it.

Generally, we only make our partners people that we trust and people we are willing to be partially responsible for our own success. There are tremendous ranges in the levels of partnership; the concept of a marriage as a partnership, going into business with someone as a partnership, and now there is a potential of government and the private sector having a partnership.

There is very definitely a symbiotic relationship between government and the private sector. The private sector produces goods and services that are sold to consumers that form the gross national product. This gross national product serves as a funding base for the creation of taxation that then allows government to have funds to perform activities that are in the interest of the general public. This symbiotic relationship is transparent a great deal of the time. Most people don't ever bother to think that jobs mean better government and that if one begins to overwhelm the other the overall system will suffer.

This phenomenon is beginning to come home in the fire service. After all, the fire service is a public entity. And, we are in the business of regulating a great deal of the private sector. We call that codes and ordinances. There is a symbiotic relationship there also.

I have had recent conversations with members of the private sector, however, which indicates there has clearly been a rift. The private sector is beginning to feel more as if they are shouldering a greater amount of the burden than is reasonable. They want relief.

And, I don't think anyone can state that the fire service has been given a carte blanche either. More often, we are facing criticisms of our service and a lowering of the levels of resources that are made available for fire protection. So, we have a mutual interest. How can we, in the fire service, do more to protect the community's business climate and, at the same time, make sure we assure an adequate level of fire and life safety?

One potential concept is called "partnering". Partnering is a methodology wherein the building and construction community sits down with the fire service representatives at the earliest possible stage in the process of a building project and develops a whole new working relationship that is based on a very



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simple premise. That premise is how to build something as economically as possible and as safely as possible simultaneously.

It sounds like a radical idea, doesn't it? We've always been out for fire and life safety. The business community has always been out to build their buildings as economically as possible. What is radical about it is the idea that we have these mutual interests and that we work on them simultaneously.

A few months ago, I was fortunate enough to meet a man named Jim Eisenhart. Jim is a principal in a company called the Ventura Consulting Firm. I heard that Jim had worked with a fire chief in a local community to use the partnering concept to iron out some difficulties in the creation of a shopping center. After meeting with Mr. Eisenhart, I was convinced that his methodology has an application for the fire service.

Here's how it works. Jim Eisenhart works with the principles that are going to be involved in the ultimate regulatory framework of a given project. He brings these individuals together at the very onset of the discussion of the project and goes through a series of exercises that are designed to lie to rest the major philosophical differences that occur between the public and private sectors. In the partnering exercise, Eisenhart opens the discussion regarding how people can help and/or hurt each other in the process of trying to accomplish the same objective.

This process can be cathartic. In many cases, it is extremely difficult to move forward on a project because people are still harboring old wounds and perceptions of real and perceived abuses from previous experiences. Eisenhart's process then goes to the next level, which is to talk about the mutual interest that all parties have in the ultimate development of the project. He focuses on the needs from everyone's different perspective and then develops commonalities and alternatives that mutually reinforce participants in the partnering process.

In two paragraphs we gave you a brief description of something that is really quite complex. To see if the partnering concept had any merit, I recently conducted a partnering session involving principle people from the major building industries and fire protection professionals in California. I actively sought out the participation of those people who are involved in major development projects throughout the entire state and the individuals who represent the Fire Prevention Officers and Fire Chiefs Associations.

Two work sessions were held. During these sessions, it was clear that the building community looks upon the fire service as a major obstacle in the resolution of problems. It was also clear in the discussion that the fire service often looks at the building and development community as being driven entirely by profits as opposed to public policy. Extensive dialogue occurred back and forth across the table in clarification of how and why the respective parties feel the way they do.



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What came out of the partnering workshop was the overall realization that the only way to make things better was to work better together. Therefore, the group met again to focus on the need for this process to be employed by a specific project and the areas in which significant growth was about to occur.

One of the representatives who had information regarding the current rates of growth provided the group with an assessment of the areas in which the greatest amount of growth will probably occur over the next 12 to 18 months.

Then, a pilot project was sought out. One of the members represented Santa Barbara County, California. This member proposed that they conduct a partnering project in conjunction with an event that was soon to occur in Santa Barbara County. The consensus of the group was that it would be an excellent area to demonstrate the methodology and it was selected as the pilot site.

Since that meeting, several other projects have been identified, which include doing a joint study of codes and ordinances to determine redundancies and overlaps between state and local regulatory agencies. Another project that has been identified is working with the local fire authority in the construction of an underground transportation system.

All these projects are at the experimental stage. None have really proven that partnering will work as a concept. What has been proven is that members of the building, construction and development industry and the fire services do have common interests. By participating in the workshops and clarifying some of the roles and responsibilities, the partnering project has already improved the level of communications among these groups. All the problems have not gone away. Among the most severe is the fact that no matter what occurs at the state level in these discussions, individual inspectors out in individual communities who are unaware of this process can still be a source of difficulty for construction projects. And, individual developers and construction firms that are unaware of the needs of the fire service will continue to create conditions that often force conflict to occur.

Not unlike the trip of a thousand miles, this particular process begins with a few small steps. By engaging the partnering methodology among key decision makers at the state level, it is conceivable that this process will gain acceptance at the regional and then perhaps the local level. It will not necessarily result in a reduction of regulatory requirements, but it does have a high degree of potential for eliminating the conflict that arises when they are mutually contradictory.

Perhaps not too far in the future, we will have a process in place that looks upon the public sector as regulatory but facilitatory to an industry that will continue to provide the places where we work and live.