



# ***CHIEF'S FILE CABINET***

***Ronny J. Coleman***

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## Poker Face

I'm not a card player. However, I do have a few friends that play poker, so I have observed their behaviors when they play. One of the more interesting behaviors to watch for is their methods of making a bluff. Some are really good at it. Others are pretty transparent. From my perspective, I consider the ones that are sometimes good and sometimes bad are the really dangerous ones. You never know what they are really doing.

My reason is that they are unpredictable and the ever present element of luck seems to provide them with the element of success or failure at a whimsical pace. If you are a card player yourself, I will bet that you believe you're good at it, whether you are or not. Bluffing is part of the strategy when you have some cards down and some cards up. Lady luck often betrays you by forcing you to reveal that your hand is not as strong as you would like it to be. Remember Kenny Rogers, he reminded us to know when to hold 'em and know when to fold 'em?

I chose this image after listening to the testimony of many of the individuals that spoke at the recent ICC Code Hearings in Rochester New York. I hope to surprise you by not saying that it was just the other side that was playing some cards face down. In fact, this column will propose that both sides of the sprinkler argument are bluffing in a sense. Both sides are doing this very well, in spite of the fact that this one phenomenon may be one of the reasons we have been unable to achieve a consensus on public policy regarding fire protection.

Many of the readers of this column will recognize that there are a series of myths that get dredged up every time there is a public hearing. Invariably the same arguments evolve about the issues of cost, operations, effectiveness, water damage to residences, and the question of whether or not the public wants that level of protection or not. I won't repeat the abstract on each myth right now for sake of brevity.

But, I will suggest that for every one of those issues, we meaning sprinkler advocates have our cards, and they, the sprinkler opposition have their cards. Right now, both sides have some cards down and some cards facing up.

Let me try to be more specific by going back and looking at the "deck" that all of those cards are taken from. A conventional deck has four suits; club, spade, diamond and heart.

There are 13 cards in each suit. There is the ace and the numbers 2 through, 10, then - Jack, Queen and King. A deck of cards has 52 different cards and literally thousands of ways they can be shuffled and then dealt.



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Let's suppose, for a minute, that the four suits represent the following interests; the fire service, the sprinkler industry, the builder and developer, and the code adoption process. You will note that I did not assign a suit to the public, for in my metaphorical approach, they are not really at the table. Instead, they are the chips we, the four interested groups are playing to win.

I would suggest that each interest group wants the public to see their solution as a positive thing. They do want their own position to be positive. Fire services maintain its reputation as a saver of lives and property; the sprinkler industry wants to continue to provide viable products and services, the home builder wants to sell the buildings they create and the code groups want to obtains compliance with its rules. The name of the game is to play your cards right so that the other guy loses on the latest round.

To continue with my comparison, imagine that each card in the suit represents a level of importance like it does in a card game. An ace is a low number, but combined with other aces, or lined up with other cards it has impact.

As I contemplated the development of this image, I began to compare the cards in a deck with the value that various considerations bring to the game players. Each card represents an attribute of winning, so to speak. As a result I developed a little table to describe this relative concept.

Ace	=	Facts
Deuce	=	Anecdotes
Three	=	Speculation
Four	=	Undocumented claims
Five	=	Locally support actions
Six	=	Responsible support action
Seven	=	State adopted actions
Eight	=	Comparison of Outcomes
Nine	=	Proposed Studies
Ten	=	Completed Studies
Jack	=	Alliances
Queen	=	Compassion
King	=	Authority

Now let's go back to our cards. Two up, 3 down and you are now getting ready to put down your bet. Arranged around the table are as many players as can be tolerated at the table. They all hope to win the next jackpot.



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Each time the hand is dealt is similar to each time someone goes to the microphone, or proposes a code amendment trying to hit the jack pot and resolve, once and for all the game. Many think that their position is the treasure to be sought. Not everyone agrees on when that will occur, i.e., will they be in or out? And, there is a lot of bluffing going on.

Do you want to bet right now who will eventually win the game?

Me, neither, I am waiting for the next hand to be dealt. And, here's how those hands will likely be dealt. Various parties that are subordinate to the four interested groups will assemble their hands and then declare themselves the winner. In an overly simplified version it is as if someone has a hand full of cards that are all the same, i.e., four speculative claims that hand might win. Moreover, having two speculations setting face up, and two more being shared "off the record" could defeat two published studies that were unsupported by other cards in the deck.

How many times has this hand been dealt? In my opinion, thousands of times and the stakes keep getting higher and higher. It's one thing to win or lose at the local level, and quite another to do so at the state or national level.

What if the cards are all on the table face up? And, what if we didn't shuffle the deck, but instead allowed each group to make a conscious choice as to which 5 cards they want to play.

The reason I chose this strategy is that right now that's what is being done with the cards face down. Lower level cards are being played without being reviewed in the discussion. We are playing blind man's bluff with the cards.

In that game a speculative statement is considered to be just as valuable as facts, if someone produces a whole bunch of the former when the latter can only produce one.

In my opinion, much of the testimony that was given at the recent ICC hearings could be placed into one or more of the descriptions I have provided, with little or no assessment as to the accuracy, the validity or the completeness of the testimony.

Again, I will not focus upon anyone specific action there. If you have had the curiosity to look into the event yourself you already know that the vote to overturn the committee action occurred. The vote was 476 to 356. A simple majority won.

The event included a vote to adopt a substitute motion was rejected by almost the same exact numbers. However 66 2/3, a significant majority was required to obtain passage.



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There were some interesting card players. One national organization posted two letters; one supporting sprinklers, the other opposing it. Building officials spoke on behalf of the adoption and vice versa. The fire service spoke up and was echoed by fire services personnel who spoke against it. The hands that were played were obviously not all in the same suit of cards.

After it was all over, one individual chose to shout out loud; We Won! As if he had won the biggest jackpot of the century. From my perspective he lost to a straight on the first vote, and won with four deuces on the second.

The game not won, just the hand. It is very likely the player in this game will see a rematch soon. The degree to which the cards get turned face up may become more important over the next few years. Let me give a few real examples.

Let's just take the idea of cost of sprinklers as one example of something that is almost constantly debated. Dueling testimony at Rochester produced comments ranging from .85 per square foot to a number of \$10,000. Which one is right? Nobody in that room could say. Both were accepted as being equal in value. Both were allowed to stud.

But, what if I told you that there was a house that was built that had a system put in that cost \$10,000, but was installed at .85 per square foot. Yes, the building would have to be almost 12,000 square feet. Are there buildings out there like that? I can actually show you a few.

Outlandish statements without attribution are bluffs. They are face down cards.

So, what if we normalize the data and cited the comparison to be based only on a median priced home, limited to standard metropolitan statistical area and its comparisons were not based on the basis of the total cost, but rather the normalized expression of the number of dollars and cents per square foot, a representation of a percentage of the sale cost of that median home.

Where is the study that answers that question? Who has validated that data, instead of letting it be sent out like it was the gospel?

Didn't get one wrong here, I am not sure that studies are not being developed. This just raises another question; where are the studies that we used to justify everybody's claims.

Going back to my mythological card deck, 4 anecdotal stories do not beat 4 published studies.

Well, by now, you might be wishing I had used dominos or chess as my instrument of trying to make the case that we, the fire service need a better game plan. The sprinkler industry needs a better game plan.



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I have no doubts that the opposition wants and needs a better game plan. Where I am going with this is also is that the code development process needs a better game plan. They have a stake in the game also.

When decisions continue to be made that are emotional and personalized the quality of the decision deteriorates.

If the code process is going to win some of the pots it has to have the highest hand of all, the royal flush. All of the highest cards, all in the same suits.

Or, the stake can be reduced through fragmentation and facts misused to defeat the consensus process. Maybe then we will be playing Go-Fish, instead of high stakes poker. Which one do you think would make it in Vegas?