



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

Politics as Usual

I was once told that when you make Battalion Chief you lose some of your friends in the fire service. That phrase was updated when I was then told that if you make fire chief you lose a few more friends and only the most loyal of your friends will remain part of your extended family when you pin of the fifth trumpet. Then the last admonition I was told was this: If you are a fire chief and you suggest putting in residential sprinklers you lose all of your friends!

Well, I guess I am living proof of all three. It is true that as I proceeded up through the ranks some of the people that I started with didn't arrive at the same place that I did professionally. However, I disagree that when I got into the residential sprinkler business I didn't lose all of my friends, I merely lost the ones that thought I was crazy.

If you are a person who has already fought this battle to get residential sprinklers you probably already know what I am talking about. If you are one of those that is merely contemplating it, then perhaps you need to pay attention for the next couple of paragraphs about the political fallout of being a residential sprinkler advocate.

It is my belief that there are three major political hurdles that you will face if you become an advocate of residential sprinklers. They are: the building industry, your own firefighters, the sprinkler industry itself.

And, I suppose I could throw in for good measure the very people you are trying to protect; the citizens.

You need to recognize one thing right away. Builders are not in the business of being altruistic. They are in the business of making money. Anything that is imposed upon a builder that raises their cost and reduces their profit margin is going to be considered counterproductive. It is for this reason that anybody who is even contemplating going into the residential sprinkler business begin to thoroughly – and I mean thoroughly, understand the building industry and the local community. If the first time you meet a builder is at a major public hearing where you are attempting to advocate a sprinkler position, you are already behind the learning curve.

The next item you need to be concerned about is the message you send to the people that you would have expected to support you; your firefighters. Without belaboring all of the issues that can be generated in a labor management arena, I can almost guarantee you that one of the ideas that is anathema to the fire service is that residential sprinklers are somehow or other meant to reduce need to have firefighters. In all candor, anybody who attempts to advocate a residential sprinkler on the basis of eliminating firefighter jobs is foolish.



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I would point out at the very outset that NFPA 13D talks about the fact that sprinklers are there to protect the building and lives for the first ten minutes. Any idea that has to show up within that ten minutes and one second?

Of course I am talking about firefighters. I think it is very prudent for anybody who is working on a residential sprinkler ordinance to have a strong channel of communication with their labor group. This discussion is not about reducing positions. It is about making fire departments operate more effectively. In many ways it is about firefighter safety in the long run. It is about protecting lives and property.

And then there is the sprinkler industry itself. This column is going out in Sprinkler Magazine. I am anticipating that much of the message that I am about to give is not going to apply to the majority of people reading this magazine. You are not likely to be of the persuasion that is opposed to sprinklers. Nonetheless, I will tell you that unless you have an industry in your local area that is capable of responding to the demands to put in residential sprinklers, you may be creating problems for yourself.

My suggestion is that before you even talk publicly about residential sprinkler market that you find out about the sprinkler market by interfacing with your sprinkler contractors in your local area. I once testified at a city council hearing where a builder gave a quote that I knew to be the rate for putting in a commercial sprinkler system. When I was questioned by the mayor he asked me if I agreed with the cost being proposed. I was able to produce a list of sprinkler companies, their websites and their installation rates that covered every contractor within 100 miles of the location. He had one bid. I had a bid list. You have to be prepared for questions like that because the building industry may not know how to locate them. You can.

This almost takes on the classic which comes first the chicken or the egg. If you have got major sprinkler contractors that don't know anything about residential sprinklers, perhaps it is time to meet with them and talk about how they can develop an additional competency. If you do not have a sprinkler industry organization in your local area perhaps it is time to talk to the professional associations and open up the channel of communications. If you do not know how to do that, perhaps it is time to talk to organizations such as Operation Life Safety (OLS) and try to build a network of information so that you are not challenging your own contractors.

Informing your own citizens is not something that you can take lightly either. A big part of sprinkler advocacy is to reach out to the community and obtain their support for this concept. In previous article I have referred to many web sites that you can look to for support. For purposes of brevity we will not repeat them here. They can easily be reviewed in the August 2008 issues of Sprinkler Age.



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But, most importantly you should not just visit these websites, you need to download and develop your own library of documents. Create folder somewhere and make sure that you are keeping up with the State of the Art in information.

For example, do you have a copy of the Fire Protection Research Foundations most recent report?

Entitled Home Fire Sprinkler Cost Assessment, and dated September 2008, this document is the latest in the discussion of the various arguments over the costs of sprinkler. I am not going to tell what it says, because if I do, you might not go and get your own copy. You need to get a pdf of this document and add it to a shelf of informational resources. I know one thing – those that are actively opposed to this movement have already done so. Further, they are probably going to try and use it in many that can be detrimental at the local level if you are not already up to speed with the report. Your library needs to be bigger than their library.

In addition to these three main political pressures, there are often other political nuances that can arise during the discussion of a residential sprinkler ordinance. My advice to anybody who wants to get into the residential sprinkler game is that you be prepared to spend a minimum of one year in advance of any open advocacy by making sure that you have assessed all of the components that could rare up in the event that there will be a controversy associated with your recommendation.

Now let's go back to the opening paragraph and I am also reminded of a statement that was alluded to – I believe credited to a major criminal in the past – “keep your friends close, but keep your enemies closer”.

As a last resort we need to remember that code adoption is a political process. We need to practice it at the level of the capital P – Political, rather than the small p in politics which is synchronous with the term “petty”. If you are going to use your political capital you are far ahead of the game by doing your homework. And hopefully you will never have to day the “dog ate it!”