



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

***Ronny J. Coleman***

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## Putting Fire Back Into Fire Prevention

Here is a horror story for you. A fire chief goes to great lengths to put a specific piece of fire protection technology into a very complicated building. In the process the Fire Marshal suffers the consequences of fighting battles behind the scenes that cost him/her in terms of their working relationship with the building and development community.

Fast forward a couple of years later, when a fire actually occurs in the occupancy and the very thing that the chief fought to achieve in the way of built in fire protection is totally overlooked by the responding crews as they attempt to cope with the problem facing them.

If you think that this is a farfetched tale, let me assure you that there is ample evidence to demonstrate that it has actually happened in the past and is likely to continue to occur in the future. One of the reasons for this phenomenon is that many fire prevention bureaus have systematically removed fire from fire prevention by not getting their operational people closely engaged with the process of fire code development.

As far away as I am from you right now, I can already hear some of you muttering to yourself “what the heck”. You might think that I have fallen over to the dark side and start to believe that fire suppression is more important than fire prevention. Or, worse yet you think that I am getting ready to criticize fire prevention for ignoring the wishes of fire suppression. Well, stop muttering for just a few more paragraphs and continue following my line of reasoning.

One of the very real reasons that we attempt to put things into the fire code to mitigate against the risk is to benefit our suppression forces. In other columns I have referred to the fact that the fire code provisions ranging all the way from property setbacks (which equal exposure protection) and location of exits (which deals with rescue and evacuation) are as much a part of concern of the operational people as they are of the individuals writing and enforcing the fire code. Fire prevention is every bit as much about firefighter safety as it is about limiting damage.

But I am actually concerned about something a little different than that. What I am talking about is the process of plan checking during which decisions are made about how to approach a building, how to maneuver around it and how to gain access to it are influenced by operational implications. And where our fire operations people during this discussion? They are over at the fire station talking tactics, strategy and safety.

Recently I was in a conversation with a fire prevention friend of mine who is extensively involved in plan check and he expressed a concern about the fact that more and more “alternatives” are being proposed



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regarding how to get access to the exterior of a building and there is nobody developing the parameters from the operations division to evaluate whether or not the operations folks can cope with the solutions being offered.

As simple a thing as a turning radius of a fire truck can often bear heavily on the implications of plan check review process. And, of course, many fire agencies have dealt with the development of standards to deal with that one issue. But the list is much lengthier than that. I can recall once in my career having a rather extensive discussion with a developer for high rise building over the size of an elevator. They had designed an elevator for the movement of people that would not allow a full size gurney to go into place to evacuate a medical aid victim from an upper floor.

As an operational BC at the time, I was involved in the discussions of what should be the minimum dimension of an elevator in this high rise, because the building was populated entirely by people who were over the age of 65. Granted, that was a long time ago and it probably has gone into the annals of contemporary wisdom to account for things like that, but what about the things that we are not looking out for right now?

There are a few potential strategies that we in the fire community could contemplate to change this. First and foremost perhaps we should adopt the idea of requiring that individuals entering the fire service spend some time in a fire prevention bureau. Back in the 50's and 60's and even as late as the mid 70's many fire departments embraced the idea that recruit firefighters serving in their fire prevention bureaus learn a lot about construction and fire behavior. Unfortunately, as a practice it has faded away.

The second concept could be to continue to use the fire prevention bureau as one of the stepping stones of succession planning of an organization. To be real blunt about it, that is not a very popular strategy for the simple reason that it is an eight hour workday and most firefighters do not like it. But 6 months in the bureau could change a person's perspective on what those code provisions really mean to the fire service.

In my conversation with my fire prevention friend, I asked him how he overcomes this gap within his own department. his comment was that he had managed to make friends with several truly reasonable fire officers over "on the floor" and whenever a new problem was posed to him he would often go over and engage them in a dialogue about their observations, concerns and recommendations. In other words, he engaged in a little participative management in prevention.

Perhaps we should move a little further down the scale of adaptability and starting putting seasoned fire officers onto the sub committees within our planning development groups to look at the long range implications of new construction and creative architecture. While our fire prevention people are away



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attending conferences rewriting the codes somebody needs to keep their eye on the idea of being able to use the solution under crisis.

There are a lot of potential problems with all of these strategies and I know that. In my experience I have seen fire prevention continue to march to a different drummer in making code changes that result in some pretty expensive code requirements that may or may not make any sense to the operational fire service. I have simultaneously watched the operational side of the fire service turn a blind eye toward the development of the sophistication going into buildings almost to the point of endangering themselves when they are required to operate on emergencies.

The impact of many fire departments that are focusing most of their energy on responding to emergency medical aids may well be developing an information and competency gap that will cost our profession in the long run.

Lastly, fire departments should be doing everything they can to restore the concept of preplanning into the day to day activities of fire departments. Prevention and preplanning are dual ways of reducing the loss of life and property. One leads to the other. And vice-versa, putting prevention components into a building and then not sharing the expertise on how to use them is definitely not an appropriate course of action for a professional service.

The true legacy of the fire service included fire officers like John Damrell and his contemporaries of the late 1880's who focused a significant amount of their energy and effort into improving the fire safety of their communities. The modern fire chief has a different plate – make that a platter – from which to act upon. It is in the best interest of the fire profession overall for both fire prevention and fire suppression to be arm and arm as we proceed down the path of developing the fire problem in the next century.