CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

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Saint Patrick's Fire Brigade

As the singer Bob Dylan once said, "The times they are a changin". Over a period of the last fifty years the growth and development in the United States of America has been of epic proportions. Bigger was always better. Sprawl was a way of life and concern over the consequences on the environment was seldom a consideration. That may well be changing and as I begin to change it may have some subtle but simultaneously severe impacts on the manner in which we execute fire prevention in this country.

A few days ago I was at Eastern Kentucky University on Saint Patrick's Day and was in hot pursuit of a green beer. But, I found out that the local pub that was the usual spot for obtaining a green beer had recently burned down and was being re-constructed as we spoke. This opened up a discussion of the new standards that the building was going to have to comply with and I made a feeble joke that not only the beer was likely to be green in the future, but so is the building – they are going green, you know.

If going green hasn't been much of a topic in your area recently, stand by. It may well emerge an arena that is totally outside of your fire department. When we speak of the concept of greenness, what we are talking about is lowering the impact on a community of the factor of human development. I certainly don't want to go down the path trying to explain global warming at this point, but rather to point out that many communities are now beginning to realize that the practices of the past are consuming huge amounts of energy which for the foreseeable future may or may not be in our best interest.

An example of this concept is the growing movement to go back to mixed occupancies in communities. For years we have been separating the residential occupancy from the commercial and industrial occupancy. The consideration in the past fifty years was that the two were incompatible. Yet, with the aging of America and the impact on our transportation and circulation system there is a growing realization that there is a need to sometimes put these two concepts back together.

The Europeans frankly have never had that experience because they have never adopted the urban sprawl approach that manifested this country. If you can recall your college class on history the whole idea of manifest destiny gave the United States the idea that if we could continue to roll out westward where space was not an option.

The manifestation today is that more communities are beginning to realize that they need to revitalize their downtown areas and to bring people closer together to increase density. Density is a problem for the fire service. The closer together you put people the more likely the inappropriate behavior by one person can have consequence on another. Witness the problems of tenement housing for example. Most of our fire codes and building codes have been all about compartmentalizing and separating

people from one another so that when a fire occurs in one location it has a minimum impact in another. Sustainable communities are exactly the opposite.

And, it is creating some problems. Recently a newspaper article appeared in a major metropolitan newspaper in which the local fire department was land blasted for demanding the wider streets in a sustainable community because their fire apparatus was too big to be able to use them. Talk about a good way to start an argument in a firehouse! American fire apparatus has gotten significantly larger and larger as we have demanded more and more in our way of access to buildings. That very premise stands a remote possibility of being challenged in the very near future.

This particular article accused the fire department of being arbitrary and capricious in their establishment of minimum standards for apparatus widths, turning radius and other factors. I am not going to go there with this column. I will suggest that as this particular concept starts gaining ground there is going to be more and more challenges to the fire service to come up with operational solutions that are consistent with land use policies.

At this point the fire service has two choices. We can fight this thing or we can learn to live with it. Fighting this thing is going to place the fire service in jeopardy in terms of its credibility. My reasoning behind that is that the issue of energy reliance and the concentration of services so that the infrastructure can match the number of people to pay for a service is going to continue to be a problem. Urban sprawl is counterproductive to effectiveness. As fire marshals find themselves in committee meetings they are going to find a larger number of people on the other side of the table demanding to know why we are resistant to this element of concentration.

This column is way to short to come up with all of the reasons why that could be a very combative situation. But it is long enough to state that we need to become more conversant with the issue of the environment. Planning the development of a community today is not all about sticks and bricks. It contains a component of sustainability that the fire service has been somewhat exempt from dealing with in the past.

One of the ways we might start understanding this a little bit better is to make fire prevention bureaus a greener place in and of itself. For example, in my trips to Europe I have noticed that many of the fire prevention bureaus in other countries are using alternative energy vehicles. Many of them are using electrical vehicles to power their one person fire prevention people going out into the field who are enforcing some of these very specific mandates. When you show up at the scene of a fire inspection driving a vehicle that only gets like 5 miles to the gallon, it does give a sense of indifference on our part to the overall issue. One of the ways of becoming a greener fire prevention bureau is to take a look around for such things as ways that we can make a bureau at least aware of its impact on the community.

Moreover, I think that we are going to find a considerable amount of involvement in issues such as solar power and the use of fuels such as ethanol, hydrogen and other hybrid solutions that are going to force new considerations upon our fire codes.

For example, imagine what the consequence could be if entire roof surface of a public assembly consisted of solar panels so that the building would be totally independent of the grid!

Imagine what would happen to an apartment house if you had to be able to recharge your vehicle every night by having access to a major power source to recharge batteries on a broad basis?

This revolution is not going to come upon your fire prevention vehicle overnight. To the contrary it is going to start creeping up like the rising of the tide over period of time. My suggestion to authorities having jurisdiction is to start acquiring a vocabulary that is greener and simultaneously start looking at some of the websites that are providing insight into this phenomenon. An add on to this article is a series of terms that you should start adding to your vocabulary and a couple websites that you should at least visit to get some insight into the phenomenon.

Maybe Dr. Seuss was giving us a clue a few years ago when he talked about green eggs and ham. In our modern society today green might mean lean. But the color green has always been used as a universal symbol as going forward. If you want to keep your fire department in the leading edge of change then you should consider adopting a green light to go green. That means leaning a new vocabulary.

One way to start is to become more knowledgeable of the LEED concept. LEED is an acronym that stands for Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design. This concept is currently being shepherded by the United States Green Building Council (USGBC). They have created a "Green Building Rating System that encourages and accelerates global adoption of sustainable green building and developmental practices. The way they have approached this is through the creation and implementation of universally understood and accepted tools and performance criteria.

Recently I went onto their website (http://www.usgbc.org) to try and find out how much time energy and effort they have placed upon fire safe practices. I won't tell what I found. I encourage you to look there yourself. Just type in Leed Green Buildings and see what comes up.

There are currently 38 LEED for Homes providers in the United States, located in most of the leading housing markets. USGBC selects Providers that demonstrate outstanding abilities and have a proven record of supporting builders in the construction of high-performance, sustainable homes. These providers are responsible for selecting suitable LEED for Homes projects and administering a team of Green Raters, who together with the providers verify that homes in the program are built to meet the requirements of the rating system. They might just be operating in your town right now.

Homebuilders who are interested in participating in the LEED for Homes program are being encouraged to contact one of the LEED for Homes providers at addresses listed on their website. Here is a question for you. Have any of your local developers encouraged you to visit that site?

If not, there is way to locate a provider in your area, just review the geographically proximate providers listed on their website. USGBC will be selecting new providers as needed as the LEED for Homes program continues to grow. Will we be at the table when that happens?

Here is a small test for you. What is a charrett? What role does ureaformaldehyde play in green buildings? What is a "thermal envelope? The answers are on those websites.

So, when I start talking to you fire marshals about "going green" please don't think that I am talking about Saint Patrick's Day. It's not about green beer – it's about green buildings…..And, if those developers' that are going green don't be careful those green buildings could end up being black.