



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

Side by Side

Among the techniques that have evolved over the years in selling the concept of residential sprinklers has been affectionately dubbed the “side by side”. I am sure that almost everybody reading Sprinkler Age has seen one or more of them. Probably some of you have conducted them yourself. The concept has been around for a long time. If you will recall, it has even been used by the scientific community. This format of comparing and contrasting protection with and without sprinklers has been used by National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST) in producing DVD’s that have helped sell the concept of sprinklers throughout the United States. The fire service has spent millions of dollars in creating residential fire sprinkler trailers that essentially tell the same story.

If you are a practitioner of this methodology, I will bet more than one of you has had a period of intense anxiety when the burn didn’t quite go the way you thought. For the most part, sides by sides are tremendously successful. But, every once in a while, weather, fuel factors and/or research gremlins will haunt you by depriving you of the dramatic side by side effect that you are hoping to impress the audience with. Having done a number of these burns, I can also bet you that you still have your detractors who stand on the sidelines and say, “that is just not real”. More than one argument has started on such a sidewalk between advocate and adversary.

But what can anyone say when the side by side occurs in the real world? I am talking about comparing and contrasting real fires. Regardless of good luck or bad luck, real fires destroy real property and in some cases real lives. We have had a lot of dialogue about whether sprinkler systems make any sense at all with our adversaries the home builders. To be fair, I would tell you that there are builders out there that do get it. They realize that their product is where people place their family and possessions in the most vulnerable ways. Some builders actually do understand that they have a moral imperative to not only produce a beautiful product but a safe one at the same time. On the other hand, there are many that don’t.

So, let’s go back to the concept of a side by side. As I was working with a newspaper reporter to review a wildland fire that occurred over 35 years ago, he was asking a series of questions about how things are different today than they were then. The main theme of the article was discussing an urban interface fire that had entered a city where I had been fire chief many decades ago. The date was January 21st 1976. It was the year of the bicentennial and everyone was celebrating. The Freedom Train was even in town. At 5:30 am a wildland fire started outside of the city. Accelerated by Santa Ana winds it tore into the city in the late morning destroying 16 homes and damaging 145 others.

As the reporter was interviewing me he tried to draw a comparison between that wildland fire and our efforts on residential sprinklers. Our code development efforts were occurring at that time. I had to



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admit to him that the incentive for our residential sprinkler requirement was not driven by the wildland fire. Instead, it forced our attention on a series of other code amendments that we executed over the next couple of years regarding roofs and defensible space. But the reporter was stuck on the idea that the fire generated our sprinkler code development. We exchanged several phone calls. On the day of the anniversary, he called me and indicated that a large structural fire had occurred in San Clemente on the anniversary date in 2011. It destroyed a garage in an apartment house. I quickly followed his link and discovered that the fire had occurred in an unsprinklered apartment house. His call was then followed by an email from a neighboring fire chief who advised me that there had been another fire the same day in a fully sprinklered residence.

The difference between these two fires was dramatic. While they weren't literally side by side, they occurred in the same 24-hour period. One fire required a full second alarm assignment of firefighters to extinguish the blaze. It resulted in over \$140,000 in property loss. That fire occurred on El Portal in the City of San Clemente.

The other fire occurred in Emerald Bay in the City of Laguna Beach. It was handled with the first in unit and resulted in only \$6,500 in property loss. In the case of this fire, the fire had started outside on the patio broke into the house and was extinguished by a single sprinkler. In the first fire, units were on scene for hours. In the second fire, after they had scanned the property with an infrared heat scanner the firefighters were back in service within minutes. In this side by side comparison, the differences between the losses are going to be made up by the insurance industry. After all, don't they have to pay you back for everything you lose in a fire? There is more to the calculus than that. For example, the fire in the unsprinklered risk consumed much larger numbers of community resources. Has anybody ever figured out what the cost is to a community when you have fire go to multiple alarms and deprive other neighborhoods of their initial attack resources? Has anyone ever figured out why the single family dwelling is the scene of more firefighter injuries than any other type of incident? These are the real consequences of the side by side comparison in the real world.

The detractors from residential sprinklers simply do not recognize that those losses include pets or wedding photos? Perhaps a lifelong collection that a person had been working on ever since they were a child can be destroyed. How about the destruction of letters that a person had received from a distant family member when they are halfway around the world. The true loss between these side by side fires can best be measured by the fact that in one case life goes on with minor inconvenience and another life almost has to start all over again.

I know that some of the builders don't get this concept and I doubt that the majority of them ever will. But almost every fire that I have gone on involving structures since 1968, I have performed a mental side by side of comparing what I thought might have happened if the building had been fully sprinklered. If we take those hypothetical side by side scenarios and populate them with real property and real



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people, the laboratory like atmosphere starts to go away. In a true side by side, losses may be recoverable through financial compensation. On the other hand, what goes away never comes back. I still believe that residential sprinklers are one of the most fundamental mechanisms that homeowners should have available to protect them against the ravages of fire. Nothing else accomplishes this objective as well as the silent sentinel installed in the ceiling.