



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

Space Odyssey - 2010

When I saw the movie Space Odyssey 2010 for the first time, the date seemed like it was a lifetime ahead of me. According to the information I found researching the movie, it was actually made in the year 1984. Now that seems like a lifetime behind me. Where does the time go?

But, my main point is this: Just about everybody that viewed the ideas in this very futuristic movie were saying to themselves - It is not going to have any effect upon me! We accepted the projections. Computers talked and science hastened evolution and we seemed to be OK with that. Some of the technologies have happened already, some have not. Remember the hotel scene in the movie? We are going to revisit that too.

But that's not the reason for bringing the topic up. Over the last two months, I have been researching the hotel motel industry, high rise fires and the level of public concern over fire and life safety in these occupancies and I am beginning to wonder if we have forgotten to follow-up on the idea of the 1990 Hotel & Motel Fire Safety Act. It was enacted only 6 years after Hal took over the space shuttle.

Sometimes we need to go back and remember the past to see if we have made progress or not. If we go back far enough we can learn that in 1893, In Milwaukee, Wisconsin a hotel fire killed 80 people. Now that is truly a tragedy. But what was more interesting to me was a quote from the Milwaukee Journal that told of an "appalling story of neglect, falsehood, manipulation, and concealing of truth that preceded the tragedy." We had the Winnecoff in 1946. There were similar remarks

Today its 2013. Could a tragic hotel or motel fire still happen today? Don't be so sure that we can remain smug about our performance, because of all the new stuff we have done. Are all hotels and motels sprinklered? Are there many that aren't? Look around and your tell me.

For example are you familiar with the fire in the Westcase Hilton Hotel? It occurred in Houston, Texas in March of 1982. That was before the Act. 12 out of the 30 occupants died. How about another fire in Houston Texas in 2013, where four firefighters died in a hotel fire? Same city? What was missing? Maybe sprinklers weren't put in because some owner said - I just think it is too expensive!

I am basing that perspective on the fact that the hotel industry still as a wide range of properties and risk exposure that are just as vulnerable as they were before the Act was passed. Have we forgotten about them? I will readily admit that most of the major chains are pretty well taking care of their problems over the last twenty years by a combination of new construction opportunities and retrofit. I would also submit that there are many hospitality facilities that are creating a safer and safer environment. And there are those that aren't. Or, there are some that just won't. How can the public tell the difference?



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For example, on November 5, 2012, the Fort Wayne Fire Department in Indiana responded to a reported structure fire at a hotel chain that is well known for having excellent protection. Upon arrival crews found heavy smoke in the second floor of the west wing of the hotel. While additional fire crews were requested due to the structure size and the potential occupancy levels, on scene crews quickly located the fire room and were able to extinguish the remaining fire.

The incident commander quickly informed the press that the hotel's fire suppression sprinkler system contained the fire and had already partially extinguished it before the fire department arrived. Local police officers had assisted firefighter's in quickly evacuating approximately 14 occupants from rooms nearby the fire room. The hotel management team relocated these patrons within the same property. The hotel remained operational other than the first and second floors of the wing where the fire occurred. The fire was determined to be the result of an electrical malfunction in the heating unit in the second floor fire room. No injuries were reported.

Compare that with the fire in another hotel in Houston Texas we mentioned previously, where four firefighters died in a collapse.

Which hotel do you want your family to stay in the next time they travel? Which hotel do you want to risk sending your firefighters into?

There is a scene in Space Odyssey 2009 in which individuals are going into a space shuttle and if I remember correctly it illustrated one of our major hotel chains from this era. I am not sure how close we are to actually fulfilling that opportunity to take people into space in a hotel but it does raise an interesting question. What is in store for the future of fire protection in the hospitality industry?

On one level, I believe that it is pretty clear that built in fire protection is pretty solid as part of fire and building codes. The track record over the last 20 years demonstrates that risk mitigation is working. We are reducing the impact of fire on industry and society in general. Unfortunately, it is also true that we have a considerable number of legacy occupancies out there that do not have the benefit of these provisions. And will continue to suffer from fire. We have talked about that other columns for the past several years. We should remember that the words - "Existing, non-conforming" usually means trouble when the fire does happen.

But, what about the future? Are things going to get a lot better or are they going to level off or is it possible they can get a lot worse? When I was preparing this column I really wished I could turn on a radio channel and hear what all of you are thinking right now about the nature of this discussion.

And, as parting suggestion, if you haven't already done so, you might check out the following website for some more insights on the fires in hotels and motels. <http://www.burn-injury-resource->



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center.com/2011/08/recent-fires-at-hotels-and-con.html