



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

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When is a Rose Really an Orchid?

Gertrude Stein once said, “a rose is a rose in any language.” The implication being that all roses are in the same family of flowers, regardless of size, shape, color or texture. And, one only has to review a catalogue to realize that there are a tremendous number of plants that are labeled as roses.

But, she could just as easily have said, “an orchid is an orchid in any language”, for that genus has a wide variety of versions also. The fact is that orchids and roses are in same family as flowers, but as different as they could be in terms of how they are breed and valued by society. A dozen roses is probably cheaper than a dozen orchids

In a sense, their difference help create the sense of value that differentiates the rose collectors from the orchid collector. But, in at least one way it differentiates them from each other in a way that is similar to one of the dilemmas faced by the fire service in evaluating fire inspection priorities. That difference is the complexity of sustaining the desired outcome when you have a collection of other blossom. Each rose and each orchid has a need for a specific regime and environment to produce the desired blossom.

And so it is with respect to conduct an inspection of an occupancy that is created by the codes we use to regulate the outcome of human activity within the context of code enforcement. An inspection is an inspection, in any language, but is different in many different ways.

This phenomenon creates one of those dilemmas faced by all fire agencies when it comes to allocating resources to assure that all occupancies remain safe over time. Not unlike the fact that some flowers will grow and flourish with a minimum of care, others require more time and attention to thrive. The same can be said for the various occupancies types. Some are low maintenance and others are high.

This concept began to make some sense when a fire department needs to assess its workload of inspecting its various occupancy classes. To be more specific, let’s assume that every building within a community is a potential location for two different outcomes. One outcome is that the building will remain in a safe condition without outside intervention. The other consideration is that a fire is likely to occur, unless there is outside intervention. In the case of the former, the building could gooo years without ever being visited. In the case of the latter, every day is a potential for damage and destruction.

In another article I have written about the concept of “graceful degradation”, which is a concern that is based upon the idea that even when a set of conditions in a building are at this most desirable, that over time they will deteriorate, unless small discrepancies are caught and resolved. In essence, in the vernacular of company flowers to inspections, weeds have to be pulled, plants must be pruned and



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fertilizer applied or a garden of roses and orchids will ultimately become a weed patch. Entropy will occur.

This leads us to the idea that in order to prevent entropy and assume a fire safe environment there needs to be some form of methodology to assess each occupancy for a timeframe that is most desirable for nurturing the best outcome; a fire safe environment.

We can't inspect every building every day. We can't allow buildings to go un-inspected forever. Where is the balancing point?

As a Fire Marshal, you may have to make a decision as to where that balancing point is relative to the number of hours your personnel are given to conduct inspections to assure that fire safe environment. In some instances you may have to decide whether or not an occupancy will need to be visited on a specific time cycle or not. The question you may face is whether or not you will have adequate resources to protect the community from the liability that arises from setting a standard that you cannot sustain. This is one of the most difficult tasks of managing risk in the community today. It cannot be regarded lightly. It must be addressed in a very specific fashion.

Secondarily, this is not a new problem. In April of 1997 Fire Chief Larry Donner from the Boulder Colorado Fire Department wrote an article published in Fire Chief Magazine that outlined the issue. Boulder's system used a variety of factors to calculate the life safety hazard. They included:

- Property use
- Occupancy
- Ease of escape for occupants
- Ease of access by fire crews, and
- Built-In Fire protection.

It is not the intent of this article to re-discuss the methodology for the Boulder system, but rather to focus upon the fact that failure to conduct an assessment of inspection priorities, regardless of methodology may be more of liability for the fire service than is generally regarded.

The question I have for readers is simply this; do you have any method in use for setting priorities for you inspections and secondarily how close are you coming to be able to meet the workload being established by those priorities. Do not be embarrassed if you don't have the answer right now. But, perhaps you should be interested in getting that answer soon.

As you contemplate the burden of fire code in your community perhaps you should be monitoring the work being done by the Vision 20-20 project being headed up by Jim Crawford.



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Go to strategicfire.org to view the website of this project. This project includes five strategies identified by the numerous experts involved in this project: They are:

- Strategy 1: Increase advocacy for fire prevention
- Strategy 2: Conduct a national fire safety education/social marketing campaign
- Strategy 3: Raise the importance of fire prevention within the fire service
- Strategy 4: Promote technology to enhance fire and life safety
- Strategy 5: Refine and improve the application of codes and standards that enhance public and fire fighter safety and preserve community assets.

As you prepare the budget for the forthcoming year keep in mind that in modern times you don't get what you deserve, you get what you can negotiate. And, negotiating the proper amount of staffing resources for maintaining your community's fire prevention obligations is a high priority in protecting your community.

By raising your level of knowledge of how much and how many of each type of fire hazard you have in your community perhaps you can be more successful in separating the roses and orchids from the daisies!