



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

Win, Lose or Draw

It hasn't happened yet. This article is being written before the code hearings actually occur in Baltimore. By the time this article is published, the decision will be known and the die will be cast.

Regardless of the outcome, the general perception will be that someone has won and that someone has lost for there can be no fence straddler's relative to this discussion. This phenomenon begs the question; what's next? You would be right in stating that it depends upon which side prevailed in the discussion.

Personally, I don't think so. I think it is more dependent upon the level of commitment that is brought to the process to achieve a long term goal. Let's say, for sake of argument, that the code proposals to remove residential sprinklers prevail. Does that mean that 30 years of constant improvement in sprinkler technology and their use in residential occupancies is lost forever? The answer is no. The technology is getting better every day. The solution is working in more and more places now. A successful attempt to outlaw the use of mandatory sprinklers may continue to be an obstacle to the vision of a fire safe America, but that will not prevent its ongoing use in other more enlightened communities.

I am reminded of a column that used to be in a magazine called "Blue Laws". It was not uncommon for laws to be passed to prohibit things out of fear and anxiety that today look arcane and whimsical. For example, there used to be a law in some states that if you had an automobile and you were driving it down the street someone had to walk in front of you with a flag to warn individuals riding horses or driving buggy's that the roadway was being shared with this dangerous new thing called the automobile. Today, a person carrying a flag trying to perform that task would end up as a hood ornament.

If these code change proposals are approved, it will slow down the process. But it won't go away. And the reason it won't go away is that where sprinkler technology has been brought to bear on the community fire problem, it works. Several studies have identified that fact. Subsequent studies will be written to prove this point over and over again.

Benjamin Franklin once stated in a letter in Poor Richards Almanac that "this thing is not right". He was referring to the fear of dying from fire right in your own bedroom. He was right then, and modern Benjamin's will continue to repeat that mantra regardless of whether the code proposals are passed to remove them. It is not right that the technology is being denied by those who could be the most powerful of partners in reducing one of the key issues raised in America Burning in 1973.



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Or, let's say we prevail. Let us assume that we are successful in mobilizing a sufficient number of individuals to overturn the decision of the Technical Committee. Is the task now complete? To the contrary. The task is not only incomplete but paves the way for another series of events that demand our time and attention. We have about a two year timeframe to bring about a huge improvement in technical knowledge and skill sets of all of the players that will be involved in implementing the solution.

If we are successful in retaining the fire sprinkler requirements, we may find ourselves in the same place Henry Ford did after solving the problem of mass producing of automobiles. Ford did not have a garage on every street corner or a mechanic readily available at every intersection before he launched the Model A. And, you can correct me if I am wrong, but almost all technologies have a ramp-up period after their mainstreaming into society. It is the natural evolution of technology.

So, the decision being made in Baltimore is going to be an influence over where we go regardless of who prevails. It may slow things down, it may speed things up. Those of us in the fire profession, including both members of the fire service and our allied industries need to accept the fact that we have a series of challenges.

Another important point that needs to be made about this process is that regardless of what actions are taken, there needs to be more attention paid to the exchange of information from each side of this debate. There are still questions that deserve answers and there are still problems that deserve solutions.

As I sit here on the aircraft arriving in Baltimore, I am feeling an unusual combination of exhilaration and anxiety. I have already played out in my mind what would be an appropriate response to be either the winner or the loser of the vote. What is predominant in my thought process is the absolute necessity that, regardless of which way it goes, is focusing on the goal that was so clearly articulated in America Burning. This is not a destination. This is a journey. More and more individuals are participating in the journey. Nothing is as powerful as an idea whose time has come. And that is what we are about to experience in Baltimore.

Part II

Well, it has happened now. The second part of this article is being written after the vote in Baltimore. The answer to the question of whether or not the residential sprinklers can still be considered as part of the code development process has now been answered. The answer is yes! At the hearing on October 28th, 2009, the ICC Technical Committee voted to disapprove recommendations to remove the mandatory residential sprinkler requirement. Words can barely describe the level of relief and satisfaction as a result of that decision. In a room that had reached maximum capacity, the moderator announced to those assembled that by a vote of 7 to 4 the proposals have been disapproved. A floor



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vote was asked to approve the proposal as submitted. It was defeated by a demonstration that was overwhelmingly in support of retaining the requirements.

After the vote was taken, there was time for contemplation. What's next is a reasonable question to ask.

There are a wide variety of things that are now on the horizon. As the press releases go out from various organizations announcing the results of the vote, we need to keep in the back of our minds the idea that a new task list is coming to the forefront. There is much to be done in the field of education and awareness. There is a great deal to be accomplished in the field of training and education of technical staff. There are significant opportunities for us to engage with the consuming public.

Not unlike a relay race; we now need to be prepared to pass the baton to others. The next couple of years will see a huge amount of commitment to dealing with sprinklers at the state and local level. There will be continued struggle in some areas and there will be collaboration and closure in others. Those who are aspiring for an overnight success could be disappointed because our country is a diverse and complex environment. Over the next twenty years we will see fire protection go into everything from McMansion's and Habitats for Humanity. We will see some parts of the country that are deprived of this technology out of ignorance and hubris. We will see a gradual and incremental improvement in the quality of life for the average homeowner in this country.

Simultaneously, we must continue to provide a presence in the code development process, significantly improve our use of data and find even better ways of incorporating building fire technology into risk management strategies at all levels of government.

If we go back to our metaphor of win, lose or draw, we might imagine this last couple of years as playing a set of hands in a card game. We have won some, we have lost some but most importantly we are staying in the game. The fire service should be very proud of the role played by every level of participant in this process.

I am always hesitant to name names in my columns but I am going to make an exception here. If you want to bear witness to what has just happened over the last couple of years, you should read the testimony of individuals such as Jeff Johnson, IAFC President, Glen Gaines, Deputy US Fire Administrator, and Sean DeCrane, from the IAFF. There are also thousands of individuals who can't be named in a column of this nature but are exemplified by the fire inspectors, fire chiefs and our allied industries who had journeyed to both Minneapolis and Baltimore to press for this process.

If you were among those who were in Baltimore, please feel free to share your experience with those who were not. For those of you who were in Minneapolis but could not make Baltimore, you should



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take pride in being part of playing out one of the hands we were dealt. If you are a retiring fire professional, you should be pleased that this happened on your watch. And if you are a young sprinkler advocate looking to the future, you should be very happy to have a new toolkit to protect your community.

Just remember this; while it may take years and years to be an overnight success, commitment to your principles is vital to your long term accomplishments.