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Portsmouth fire points to importance of building codes

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PORTSMOUTH — City officials say a recent incident in which a sprinkler system prevented a fire from destroying a condominium complex is a real-life example of why property owners should keep their buildings up to code.

On May 25 at 6:31 p.m., the Portsmouth Fire Department responded to an alarm at 1001 Islington St., a building that formerly housed Diaphragm Industries and has since been converted into 64 residential condominiums.

Upon arriving at the scene, fire crews found that a cardboard box full of books had been placed on top of a kitchen range and that a burner had accidentally been turned on. The resulting fire was extinguished by the activation of two sprinkler heads near the stove, according to Deputy Fire Chief Steven Griswold.

No one was home at the time of the fire, Griswold said.

The apartment was located on the ground level of the five-story tower section of the building. Without the sprinkler system activation, the fire would not have been discovered until much later, Griswold said.

"It is likely that severe damage would have resulted to the building, with fire rapidly spreading upward," Griswold said. "Many residents would have been at least temporarily homeless."

Chief Building Inspector Rick Hopley said the sprinkler system was installed to comply with the code when they were renovated as part of Eric Chinburg's development project to convert the building into luxury apartments.

It is not too often that the city can document how a sprinkler system contributes to saving a building, Hopley said.

"That's exactly what we do is all about. We don't get that many good news stories," he said.

Portsmouth Bureau Chief Michael Goot contributed to this report.