

Fire Sprinkler Advisory Board Concerned About Recent Misinformation Surrounding High-Rise Fire Sprinklers & Codes

Orland Park, IL (July 17, 2013) – Tom Lia, executive director of the Northern Illinois Fire Sprinkler Advisory Board (NIFSAB), is working to get the facts straight about retrofitting fire sprinklers in Chicago high-rise buildings built prior 1975, before fire sprinklers were required. That’s because there is a lot of misinformation about fire sprinkler costs and code compliance currently circulating among building owners and managers, their associations, real estate associations and some Chicago elected officials.

According to Lia, most of the misinformation is about cost and not understanding how fire sprinklers are retrofit in existing high-rise buildings. “These groups are claiming the costs are three to four times higher than the actual completion costs documented by fire sprinkler contractors who have recently retrofit high-rise buildings here in Chicago at four to eight dollars per square foot,” Lia said. “Unfortunately, they are making these claims in press releases, letters to their members and constituents, and on their websites. The fact is there are dozens of major cities around the country that require fire sprinklers be retrofit in older high-rise buildings including New York, Los Angeles, Atlanta and Houston,” he added.

Most buildings built prior to 1975 already have the basic infrastructure in place for retrofitting a fire sprinkler system such as the water supply, standpipes and in many cases the fire pumps. The standpipes simply need to be tapped and extended to the tenant spaces. High-rise occupants may also benefit from insurance savings for both tenant and building common areas.

The groups are up in arms about the Illinois State Fire Marshal’s June 28th filing of rule changes to update the state fire code, NFPA 101: Life Safety Code (LSC), from the 2000 edition to the 2012 edition.

The debate is based on the argument that the City of Chicago has not complied with the state code because city officials believe home rule applies — especially since the 2003 deadly Cook County Administration building fire where six people died. In addition to the current Illinois state fire marshal, each preceding state fire marshal before him has warned the city that the state fire code is written in such a way that home rule does not apply. Following the 2003 fire, the state commissioned former FEMA Director James Lee Witt to do an independent review of the incident. According to the Witt Report “*Cook County Failed to Ensure that the Cook County Administrative Building was Compliant with State Fire Code through Installation of an Automatic Fire Sprinkler System or Engineered Life Safety System.*”

The 2000 edition of the LSC requires fire sprinklers in all existing buildings. But in 2004, the City passed their own high-rise ordinance that requires all commercial high-rise buildings be retrofit, while residential buildings have less stringent codes. “Unfortunately, data shows that most high-rise fire deaths occur where people live,” notes Lia.

The Chicago ordinance requires residential high-rise buildings pass a Life Safety Evaluation (LSE) that is less stringent than the national standard listed in the NFPA Life Safety Code adopted by the state. This is evidenced by a fire on the thirty-sixth floor of the building at 260 East Chestnut that claimed the life of an 84-year-old woman on December 10, 2009. Prior to the fire, this building passed the Chicago LSE.

Upgrading to the 2012 edition of the LSC does not change the requirements for fire sprinklers in high-rises. In fact, the proposed rule adds some leeway for building owners by allowing fire sprinklers to be installed over the course of 12 years.

“We support the state fire marshal and members of the Illinois fire service, especially the firefighters who risk their lives every time there is a fire call,” states Lia. “A fire in a high-rise building without fire

sprinklers is one of the most dangerous calls. It can be difficult for firefighters to reach the upper floors since the highest fire ladder in Chicago only extends eight floors. Above that, firefighters must use building stairs and elevators while carrying fire hose and other heavy equipment. It's time for people to hear the facts and quit being plagued with misinformation. We need to do what's right so that no more fire deaths occur in Illinois."

Please see the included high-rise fire sprinkler fact sheets for additional information.

About the Northern Illinois Fire Sprinkler Advisory Board (NIFSAB)

NIFSAB is a nonprofit organization dedicated to promoting progressive legislation, raising public awareness, and educating code officials and governmental policy makers by demonstrating the proven performance of fire sprinklers in saving both lives and property. For more info, visit www.firesprinklerassoc.org.

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