

November 10, 2002

**State Senator Mahar and Daily Southtown Columnist Phil Kadner
Complete School Fire Safety Action first started in 1992**

It began in the Orland Fire District and was completed in the Orland Fire Protection District! The journey of ten years determined action by Fire Chief Robert Buhs was completed this year with Governor Ryan signing into law Public Act 92-593 re: the "Fire Safety Check in Public Schools."

In 1991 State Senator William Mahar, State Representative Mary Lou Cowlshaw and Fire Chief Robert Buhs took up the cause of school fire sprinklers. At that time I was the Fire Prevention Supervisor for the Orland Fire District and was faced with a rapidly expanding school district, building new schools and adding on to others. On a courtesy basis only, we were shown building plans for the new schools and additions and notified the school district that large areas of the schools could not be reached by 200 feet of initial attached hoses. Delays extending hose lines to reach all areas of the school were inevitable. The superintendent was notified of the deficiency, but would not budget fire sprinklers and standpipe using Life Safety Fund Bonds. Those funds were reserved for adding carpets, HVAC, and other esthetic purposes. With this lack of cooperation in the new school construction and a narrow 100 vote loss in a local school district referendum to require sprinklers, spurred Chief Buhs to take the cause statewide.

Maher & Cowlshaw sponsored the initial state legislation. Tom O'Connell of the National Fire Sprinkler Association (NFSA), the Illinois Fire Inspectors Association, and the Illinois Fire Chiefs Association all supported the measure but movement was stalled in Governor Edgar's office. At that time Daily Southtown (Economist) Columnist Phil Kadner became interested in the fact that our warehouses, grocery stores, and state prisons were better fire protected with fire sprinklers than our children's schools. Kadner began running a series of nine articles explaining the reasons why schools were not protected. Kadner beseeched, cajoled, and asked Governor Edgar to sign the bill. Finally, Governor Edgar called Phil Kadner on the phone personally and told him that he was signing the bill as they spoke. Hundreds of schools have been built with fire sprinklers since then.

Since 1997 alone over 211 schools were built with fire sprinklers not counting additions as a result. Mahar, Cowlshaw, Buhs and Kadner should be proud of their accomplishment. There were some problems however, as many superintendents tried to circumvent the law by variance attempts.

Ten years later a new bill had to be passed to allow fire department oversight of school construction. It is hard to believe but many school districts "cheated" or lied on the 50% rule on additions by not counting areas of work in existing buildings there by not requiring the fire sprinklers.

In 2000, former Chief Allenspach of Buffalo Grove, Fire Marshal Troy Shannon and FPB Skip Hart alerted us to this problem in Buffalo Grove schools. Schools were undergoing renovations and additions and attempting to keep from having to comply

with the sprinkler law. After bringing this issue into the open other fire departments related their problems with their schools.

Then, the Orland Park School District 230 problem surfaced where schools were opened regardless of numerous fire and life safety violations cited by the Palos Fire Protection District. The violations were announced as “courtesy” by the local fire departments, but totally ignored. Due to this situation, State Senator Maher of Orland Park was requesting to look into the situation and with the assistance of a Advisory Board made up members of the Palos FPD, Orland FPD, Tinley Park FD, NIFSAB and the IFIA recommended the basic codes and language on the proposed new Senate Bill 1545.

Chief Buhs, Fire Marshal Tony Agaste, Chief Mitchell of Godfrey FPD, Rich Piccolo of B&F Technical and ICCA Lobbyist Margaret Vaughn attended school subcommittee hearings in Springfield. Our fire safety friend Phil Kadner again joined the fight and wrote another series of articles in support, until Governor Ryan signed Public Act 92-593 into law.

More schools will now have fire sprinklers, standpipes, fire lanes, alarms, and connections and our school children, teachers, staff, and responding firefighters are safer as a result!

Thank you Chief Buhs, Phil Kadner and all fire service personnel who became involved by lobbying and testifying. When you receive the new school plans and are involved in pointing out problems or deficiencies and act to prevent variance attempts, please think of the above people who became active and involved for the benefit of others.