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Pennsylvania Forms Residential Fire Sprinkler Coalition Pennsylvania Fire Officials Organizing to Fight Home Builders Again Over Residential Sprinkler Requirements in New Code

Tim Knisely and John Waters will Co-Chair the Coalition, See Resolution on Last Page

E-Mail your letters/Resolution of support to pfesi@verison.net or

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American's and Pennsylvanian's have long suffered unnecessary death, property loss and excessive taxes because we have continually ignored available technology refusing to put sprinklers in our buildings, especially in our homes.

America's traditional attitude of refusing to favor prevention over the fun, challenges, suffering and costs of dealing with the results of our lack of common sense approach to prevention has plagued our society whether it is basic morality, health issues or fire safety.

In the late 1980 Pennsylvania's Fire Officials joined together in an effort to improve Pennsylvania's Fire Codes. Sprinkler requirements were one of the top priorities. After 10 years of resistance from the misinformed the Pennsylvania Legislature finally came along and adopted the national standard building code. We did not however adopt a statewide Fire Prevention Code but did provide provisions for local municipalities to adopt additional regulations as long as there were improvements to the basic building code. The Builders continued to resist and on several occasions attempted to block local initiatives and in fact took option for improvements away from progressive local officials. Now we have finally gotten Residential Sprinkler requirements in the newly adopted national codes. And guess what, the builders are now forming a massive initiative to block states from adopting the newest version of the Notational Codes.

Now the National and in particular Pennsylvania Fire and Code Officials are

A FIRE WITHOUT SPRINKLERS



On 22 December 2006, Upper Merion Fire and Rescue Services responded to a house fire at 409 North Gate Road in the Candlebrook section of Upper Merion Township. The fire was reported at 0405 hours and the on-scene time for the first piece of fire apparatus was recorded at 0411 hours. The photo above depicts conditions upon arrival – 6 minutes from dispatch.

The fire on North Gate Road achieved flashover and resulted in a fatality.

joining together to make sure that builders in Pennsylvania do not block the adoption of code requirements for residential sprinklers in all new construction.

The purpose of the Pennsylvania Residential Fire Sprinkler Coalition is duo-fold:

1. To support the adoption of the 2009 edition of the International Residential Code without lessening the fire protection provisions and,

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2. To support the concept that fixed fire protection is an integral part of a community's fire service delivery system and to allow communities to strengthen the building code in this regard.

For over 100 years, statistics have proven that the fire problem in the United States can be described in one word: residential. The overwhelming majority of our fire injuries and fatalities occur in single family dwellings. Those with the expertise in fire protection readily agree that sprinklers should be installed in all new single-family dwellings; yet those without such expertise oppose such mandates. Local governments now have the mandated responsibility to provide for fire protection for their communities; sprinklers play a large role in the fire service delivery system for a given community; prohibitions or roadblocks to the requirement for sprinklers by local government officials is in direct contravention of the democratic principle on which this country was built.

To start, we should remember these words "Those who do not learn from the mistakes of the past are doomed to repeat them." There is no doubt that great strides in fire safety have been made over the last 30 years; the statistics prove a significant decrease in fire deaths and injuries, but the percentage of such deaths and injuries occurring in residential properties has not changed. Fires in the structures in which we live account for 80% of our fire deaths and injuries; fatal fires in single-family dwellings is, by far, the greatest percentage of such fatalities.

References to the residential fire problem in the United States can be found as far back as the pre-Revolutionary War days, before there even was a United States! To commemorate the bicentennial of the United States, the Philadelphia Contributionship for the Insurance of Houses from Loss by Fire (1976), published a booklet containing excerpts from letters written by Benjamin Franklin, often called the Father of the American Fire Service. In this booklet, Franklin described the fire problem in a letter he sent to a colleague in 1770, saying, "It appears to me of great importance to build our dwelling houses, if we can, in a manner more secure from dangers of fire" (p. 5). In this same booklet,

another letter from Franklin is quoted, this letter written in 1787. In it, Franklin states, "I sometimes think men do not act like reasonable creatures when they build for themselves combustible dwellings, in which they are every day obliged to use fires" (p.5).

William Clark (1986) expressed his thoughts concerning automatic sprinklers in the residential setting. He felt "Technology is now advancing to the point where home sprinkling systems will also be affordable and should be considered seriously as the best form of home fire protection" (p. 13). Karter (1993) also addressed his thoughts on residential sprinklers; he felt that "...we must aggressively pursue the wider use of residential sprinklers" (p. 81-82).

More recently, the United States Fire Administration released a statement on its website stating "19% of all reported fires occurred in one and two family dwellings; however, these fires caused 66% of the fire deaths in the United States." America Burning Recommissioned (1999) made two succinct statements regarding residential sprinklers:

1. No tactic or strategy should detract from the requirement for sprinklers and,
2. Smoke alarms should always be the locality's second option.

The International Association of Fire Chiefs also weighed-in on the subject, stating on its website "The IAFC encourages its members to become active in supporting appropriate code changes relating to residential properties."

Why haven't we been successful in implementing widespread requirements for residential sprinklers? The United States Fire Administration (1987) observed "Failing to convince elected officials of the seriousness of the fire death, injury and loss statistics was considered the most serious problem because it is the path to resolving many other problems" (p. 54). The point at which a fire becomes deadly is known as flashover. Flashover is generally defined as the transition from a growing fire to a fully developed fire in which all combustible items in the compartment are involved in fire. (Thomas, Walton, 1994). The prevention of flashover in a compartment fire is key to reducing fire deaths and injuries.

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Both the Lookout Lane and Rebel Hill Road fires were well on their way to flashover. One sprinkler head operated at both the Lookout Lane and Rebel Hill Road fires, neither family had to move out for the evening.



On 09 January 2009, Upper Merion Fire and Rescue Services responded to a house fire at 1227 Rebel Hill Road in the Rebel Hill section of Upper Merion Township. The fire was reported at 0036 hours and the on-scene time for the first piece of fire apparatus was recorded at 0046 hours. The photo to the left depicts conditions upon arrival – 10 minutes from dispatch. That which is missing in the photo is the dryer next to the washer. This is what it looked like when it was removed. .

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In the fall of 2008, an addition was voted into the International Residential Code; it will require the installation of automatic sprinklers in single-family dwellings starting in January of 2011. In October of 2008, the National Association of Home Builders appealed this change. The appeal board denied their appeal on 11 December 2008 and this denial was affirmed by the ICC Board of Directors on 19 December 2008; as such, residential sprinklers will be required in all new single-family dwellings beginning 01 January 2011.

The home builders may have lost that appeal, but they have started the fight on another level. Recently, Pennsylvania passed legislation (HB 1096) recreating the Uniform Construction Code Review and Advisory Council. Its purpose is to "...inform the department (L&I) of any code provisions that should be excluded from the Uniform Construction Code..." Of interest, North Dakota passed similar legislation, but added the following words in their version:

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On 12 January 2009, Upper Merion Fire and Rescue Services responded to a house fire at 722 Lookout Lane in the Valley Forge Estates section of Upper Merion Township. The fire was reported at 1736 hours and the on-scene time for the first piece of fire apparatus was recorded at 1744 hours. The photo above depicts the conditions upon arrival – 8 minutes from dispatch.

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“Neither the state building code nor a building code adopted by a city, township or county may include a requirement that fire sprinklers be installed in a single family dwelling or a residential building that contains not more than two dwelling units.”

The Pennsylvania Residential Fire Sprinkler Coalition is appalled by the North Dakota language and fears that the Pennsylvania Uniform Construction Code Review and Advisory Council will attempt to exclude from the Uniform Construction Code the legally adopted provisions of the International Residential Code as they pertain to the installation of residential sprinklers. This should not be permitted; statistics have proven the fire problem in the United States and the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania is in the residential sector, to exclude them from the code defies any logic.

In 2008, the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania legislature passed laws (HB 1133 and its companion bills) making local municipalities responsible for the fire service delivery system for their constituents. Sprinklers, acting as flashover prevention systems, can have a definitive effect on that delivery system. Local governments should not be hamstrung in their mandated fire safety responsibility by legislation that would forbid them to use all of the resources needed to combat their fire problem, namely fire sprinkler system.

The builders have made it abundantly clear that they oppose any efforts to require residential sprinklers; certainly, that is their right. Their implied position that the current rate of fire fatalities and injuries is acceptable is their prerogative, but the Coalition questions their expertise in matters of fire protection.

On next Page a resolution is provided for your consideration in supporting the requirement for the installation of residential sprinklers and opposing any attempt to block said mandate in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania.

As of presstime, Feb. 9, 2009, this resolution, or similar documents, has been passed by:

Montgomery County PA

Municipal Fire Officers Association

Borough of Bridgeport

Eastern Division of the

International Association of Fire Chiefs

Pennsylvania Career Fire Chiefs Association

Upper Merion Township

Delaware Valley Burn Foundation

The Lancaster County Firemen's Association

Rohrerstown Fire Company

PFESI - Statewide Advisory Board

Expertise is defined as the knowledge of an expert. In addition to the above listed groups, the United States Fire Administration supports residential sprinklers; so to whom should one defer; to the builders, or to those who have the education, background and experience to make informed recommendations regarding fire protection and the best method for which it should be provided?

REFERENCES

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See Resolution

RESOLUTION

WHEREAS, analysis of fire injuries and fatalities conclusively show that the majority of such incidents occur in residential properties and;

WHEREAS, every major fire safety conference in the last 90 years has called for improvements in the area of residential fire safety and;

WHEREAS, the United States Fire Administration (2008) has stated “The USFA fully supports all efforts to reduce the tragic toll of fire losses in this nation, including the proposed changes to the International Residential Code that would require automatic sprinklers in all new residential construction;” and

WHEREAS, the Fire and Life Safety Section of the International Association of Fire Chiefs (2008) resolved “No other action can possibly be more responsible for saving citizen and firefighter lives and personal property than adding residential sprinkler protection to our homes;” and,

WHEREAS, America Burning Recommissioned (1999) recommended “No tactic or strategy should detract from the requirement for sprinklers” and “Smoke alarms should always be the locality’s second option.” and

WHEREAS, efforts are underway to block the requirement for residential sprinklers in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania; and,

WHEREAS, _____ feels that the fire fatality and injury rates in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania are unacceptable and,

WHEREAS, every major fire safety organization recognizes that the installation of automatic sprinklers will have a definitive long-term effect on reducing such losses.

NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED, The _____ supports the requirements for the installation of residential sprinklers and opposes any attempt to block said mandate in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania.

RESOLVED this _____ day of _____, 2009.

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