

DAILY NEWS

New York leads the way in high rise fire safety

Forty years ago this month, New York City implemented one of the most important pieces of legislation in building safety history. Local Law 5, passed on Jan. 18, 1973, required that existing high-rise office buildings more than 100 feet in feet in height to be equipped with stair pressurization and compartmentalization or a sprinkler system along with several other fire safety provisions.

New York City had suffered two major office building fires in 1970 that killed five people and injured dozens, and City Council was forced to take action. Since the legislation passed, New York City has experienced a tremendous drop in fire fatalities from 295 in 1973 to 58 last year, which was announced by Mayor Bloomberg as a record low in our city's history. The landmark sprinkler legislation has subsequently been copied by municipalities around the country.

Fire sprinklers are one of the most important components of a building, but most people don't understand how they operate.

Hollywood producers love towing infernos and promote inaccurate depictions on how fires grow and sprinkler systems work. The truth is sprinkler systems are sophisticated units that don't just deploy; they are engineered, built and maintained by mechanical contractors and steamfitters who specialize in fire suppression. It's not merely a jumble of pipes and sprinkler heads attached to a water source.

Fire safety, however, wasn't always on the minds of property owners, and it wasn't until the late 1800s that systems were developed to keep manufacturing facilities from burning down.

In the days before electricity, candles and kerosene lanterns lit factories; combustibles, particularly wood dust, were omnipresent, and buildings were routinely lost to flames. The earliest fire suppression systems were not designed to save lives, but rather to prevent inventory and property loss.

The Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire in Manhattan in 1911, which killed more than 140 work-

ers, marked a turning point in America about the need for fire safety standards. Major insurance companies began to offer building owners reductions in insurance premiums for installing sprinklers. Municipalities acknowledged fire could threaten its property tax base and began adding fire safety measures to building codes.

Tragedies are inevitably the driving force behind building, construction- and fire-code changes. Simply put: when people die in fires, new laws are written and collectively the mechanical contracting industry responds with the most cost effective protection for the new requirements. New York City has the unfortunate distinction of being a national leader when it comes to updating fire codes.



After Local Law 5 passed, another fire tragedy that killed seven people at the Blue Angel nightclub forced legislators to mandate that cabarets have fire sprinklers un-

der Local Law 41. A high-rise residential fire in 1998, that left four New Yorkers dead of smoke inhalation, led to the passage of Local Law 10, which mandated that newly constructed multi-family dwellings with three or more units be protected with fire sprinklers.

After the terror attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, New York City passed Local Law 26, which required existing commercial buildings to be retrofitted with fire suppression systems. New York City also requires fire suppression contractors to be licensed. Suppression systems are varied and there are new technologies emerging regularly to battle today's fires.

In other building industrial economies, building and fire safety requirements are lax. A recent factory fire in Pakistan, for instance, killed nearly 300 people. The lessons for us in the United

States are clear: well-maintained fire suppression systems are the best and most efficient way to protect life and property.

New York is growing, and recent population projections indicate that our city will gain another million people in the coming two decades. As our population ages, future code enhancements are likely to focus on nursing homes, senior centers and other facilities that cater to the elderly. Recent Census estimates indicated that our country will have 72 million seniors by 2030.

Sprinklers along with greater installation of smoke detectors, fire alarms and elevator recall mechanisms, have contributed greatly to the decline of fire-related fatalities in New York City. New York's Mechanical Contractors and our colleagues at Steamfitters Local 638 are meeting the challenge and helping protect the next generation of buildings with effective fire suppression systems.

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