



Fire Sprinklers

Did Florida Get Burned by Recent Changes?

by Brad Higdon

In recent years the state of Florida has enacted laws requiring fire sprinkler systems for certain existing multi-resident buildings, which provides a reasonable degree of protection for life and property from fire. Changes in building codes and the extensive development of high-rise, multi-use, and large-scale buildings of all types demanded that sprinkler systems be installed for facilities not previously sprinkled. As a result, many new technologies in sprinkler design, sprinkler systems, and related equipment were developed largely through fire research. Fire sprinklers have become part of our everyday life. These days you'll find the protection of fire sprinklers in shopping malls, restaurants, theaters, office

buildings, and most public and residential buildings.

Effective July 1, 2010, the Governor of the state of Florida signed a bill affecting condominium fire sprinklers, which states, "The local authority having jurisdiction may not require completion of the retrofitting with fire sprinkler system before the end of 2019. By December 31, 2016, an association that is not in compliance with the requirements for the fire sprinkler system and has not voted to forego retrofitting of such system must initiate an application for building permits for the required installation with the local government having jurisdiction, demonstrating that the association will become compliant by December 31, 2019."

Past research by the National Fire Protection



Association (NFPA) has revealed that wet-pipe sprinklers operated effectively 96 percent of the time in homes—including apartments. Also, where sprinklers are present, the chances of dying in a fire are reduced by one-half to three-fourths, and the average property loss per fire is cut by one-half to two-thirds, compared to fires where sprinklers are not present. NFPA has no record of a fire killing more than two





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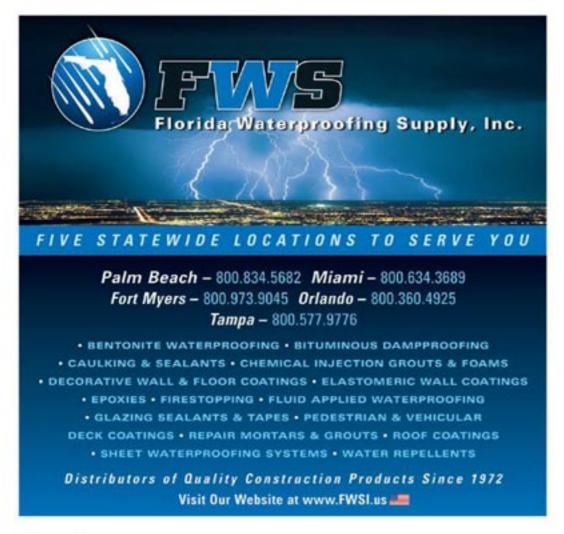
people in a completely sprinkled building where the system was properly operating, except for an explosion or flash-fire, or where an industrial fire brigade members or employees were killed during fire suppression operations.

During the process of writing this article, the television news reported that a



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fierce blaze at a non-sprinkled hotel in Iraq took the lives of at least 28 people, which may have been averted with fire sprinklers. I was reminded of where we would be today if it wasn't for our current fire codes. While there may be non- or limitedcombustible material used in the construction of a high-rise building, fires in high-rise buildings typically extend up the exterior, entering the units from windows and balcony doors whose glass is weakened by heat. It is the contents in the living units that lead to fire growth and extension. Some believe that sprinklers could cause more

damage. On the contrary, a typical sprinkler will usually activate within one and four minutes, giving residents more time to escape while limiting the growth and spread of fire, heat and toxic smoke, and may alert other occupants and authorities of activation. And, by controlling the heat, flames, and smoke, the sprinkler system protects additional property from the fire. A fire can become deadly within minutes and, if and when the fire department is notified of a fire in a nonsprinkled building, it may take at least five minutes to arrive at the fire after receiving an alarm, and an additional ten minutes to set up equipment and apply hose streams to the fire. This can result in a much larger fire, requiring more water to achieve extinguishment. Think of your sprinklers as individual firefighters in your ceiling. And, unlike what you might see in the movies, only the sprinkler(s) closest to the fire will activate.

Certainly the state of our economy was a determining factor for the decisions made by the Governor to provide an "opt-out" provision to the current requirements. Therefore, each association will have much to consider when determining whether to "opt-out" rather than install a system that can ultimately save lives, property, and dollars. Recent changes have given the associations the opportunity to re-evaluate the untimely expense of installing a fire sprinkler system. Keep in mind that installing a fire sprinkler system may be more affordable than you may think.



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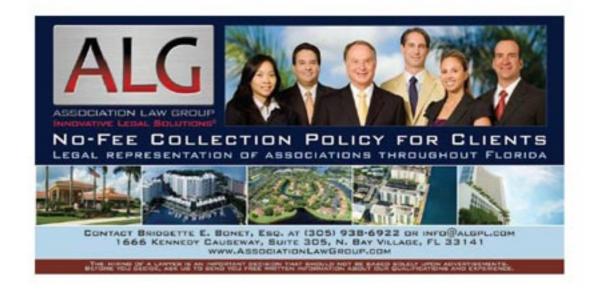
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Associations should consider the following before making their determination:

- Preservation of life and property
- Assessment of cost per unit
- Layout (design) discussed with a sprinkler professional
- Insurance discounts
- Added value of property
- Depreciation allowance for the value of the system
- Interest on a loan may be tax deductible

A recent fire at a South Florida non-sprinkled, high-rise condominium caused the evacuation of its occupants for several weeks until extensive repairs were made, and the building department was able to allow occupancy. Fire sprinklers can limit the fire and fire damage to a small area, and after a fire is extinguished, rooms can quickly be reoccupied.

Here are a few options when considering your installation; current low interest rates on loans for new systems, lease programs, contractor negotiated terms, and phased installations. Sprinklers not only provide excellent fire protection, they also represent an excellent investment opportunity for owners and can increase the value of a property. A fire sprinkler system can also be eligible for premium discounts with most insurers and having it connected to a central station is usually worth an additional discount.

An engineered life safety system is composed of some combination of standpipes, detectors, smoke control, exits, smoke compartments, and partial sprinkler protection. While this may appear to be less expensive than sprinklers initially, often in the long run sprinklers will pay for themselves, while an engineered life safety system will not. Insurance companies rarely give discounts for these engineered life safety systems.

In addition, the installation of fire sprinklers may put money back in the pocket of the building owners through savings in income, tax deductions, reduction in life safety code compliance requirements, federal legislation, and liability avoidance.

The use of sprinklers can also prevent occurrences where unit owners must be evacuated from their premises. A recent fire at a South Florida non-sprinkled, highrise condominium caused the evacuation of its occupants for several weeks until extensive repairs were made, and the building department was able to allow occupancy. Fire sprinklers can limit the fire and fire damage to a small area, and after a fire is extinguished, rooms can quickly be reoccupied.

In conclusion, an educated association and its member will ultimately make the best decisions. I recommend you contact a licensed sprinkler contractor and/or your local fire officials to discuss any questions or concerns you or your association may have.

Brad Higdon is president of Bass-United Fire & Security Systems, Inc. in Pompano Beach, Florida. For more information, visit www.bassunited.com.

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