

Lives Come First

Common Sense Dictates Approval of New Multi-Family Dwelling Sprinkler Rule

By **Mary P. Burke**, Secretary, Wisconsin Department of Commerce

Perhaps the most compelling reason I can think of for approval of the Wisconsin Department of Commerce's proposed "sprinkler" rule is, "You can't pick your neighbors in a multi-family dwelling." While single-family homeowners have the option of installing lifesaving sprinkler systems – as increasing numbers are doing – those who share living quarters in the same building with other families do not have that choice.

If the neighbor on the other side of the wall forgets to extinguish a lighted candle before going to bed, or falls asleep while smoking – you pay the price – sometimes, with your life. Commerce is proposing adopting the update of the International Building Code (IBC) we originally adopted in 2002. This update includes a requirement for sprinklers in all **new** multi-unit dwellings of more than two units. Currently, Wisconsin's standard is for sprinklers in multi-unit dwellings of more than 20 units. More than 50 lives were lost in Wisconsin during the last five years due to fires in multi-family housing units. That's too many.

It's a fact that most of Wisconsin is comprised of rural communities, often serviced by volunteer fire departments. While these firefighters do an excellent job, they may not be able to overcome the very real constraints of distance and time. Sprinkler systems in new multi-family dwellings can slow, or even halt a fire's progression while emergency personnel are still on their way.

Upon adoption of the updated IBC, Wisconsin will join 23 other states – and many of its own communities (including Appleton, Franklin, Greenfield, Shorewood Hills, Sussex, West Allis and Muskego)-- in recognizing that for multi-family buildings of more than two units, sprinklers are the best way to save lives.

Sprinklers are also a good way to save money in the form of lowered insurance premiums. According to published accounts, insurance companies offer discounts from five to 40 percent off premium costs for sprinklered buildings, depending on the company and a number of variables such as location and construction materials.

Our cost analysis for the sprinkler systems concludes that to purchase and install a standard, approved system for an average 950 sq.-ft., two-bedroom unit in a new multi-family dwelling would cost \$1,776. Spread over the life of a 30-year mortgage, that's about \$10 per month.

The Department of Commerce is the state agency responsible for ensuring the safety of our residents in the built environment, whether in elevators, amusement rides, commercial structures or their own homes. We believe that Wisconsin residents deserve the same level of protection as the residents of the 23 other states that have adopted the updated IBC.

There will be a public hearing on this matter on Thursday, December 21, 2006 at 9:30 a.m. at the Department of Commerce in Madison. Comments – which weigh as heavily as in-person testimony – will be accepted on the matter until January 5, 2007. You are invited to attend or submit comments to Jim Quast at jquast@commerce.state.wi.us to make your thoughts on the matter heard.

The Wisconsin State Fire Chiefs Association supports Commerce in our effort to save lives through the approval of rule changes under chapters Comm 14 and Comm 61 to 65 relating to the Fire Prevention Code and the Commercial Building Code. I urge the support of our residents as well, and encourage the state and the building industry to work together to do what we can to achieve our goal of saving lives.