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Cutting corners on codes invites catastrophe

Incidents like the nightclub fires in Brazil and Rhode Island are preventable, and shame on those refuse to do so

It is all but impossible to measure the level of tragedy where loss of human life is involved. It may not be the case emotionally, but philosophically, the life of a lonely 95 year old should be worth as much as that of a 6 year old.

What we can say about tragedy is the level senselessness attached to it. There's little we can do to guard against tornados, earthquakes and the like. It is arguable how much we can guard against murderers like those who put Aurora, Colo., West Webster, N.Y. and Newtown, Conn., on the map.

But there should be no argument when it comes to fires in crowded buildings. Whether it's this past weekend's nightclub fire in Brazil or the 1993 fire at The Station nightclub in Rhode Island or the seemingly countless factory fires in developing countries, these are preventable incidents.

And that is extremely tragic.

We know how to prevent these fires. It's not rocket science. It begins with concise and enforced fire codes. It includes multiple, well-marked exits, working fire extinguishers, emergency lighting, fire sprinklers, strict crowd capacity control, safe and up-to-date electrical infrastructure, and staff trained to respond to an emergency.

It includes not allowing obviously dangerous acts within a structure — like setting off pyrotechnics. It includes punishment for violation that outweighs any possible reward.

I've travelled the country and the world and have yet to meet a fire officer who is unready or unwilling to meet these challenges in his or her community. Yet how many of those ready and willing fire officials are unable to address fire code issues?

Make no mistake; this is a moral issue. The ability to prevent Brazil- and Rhode Island-like tragedies comes down to not allowing business interests to trump life-safety interests.

The business of balancing a municipal budget or driving home-construction profits should never take priority over protecting the innocent from the negligent.

I'd venture that a majority of us when visiting public places scan the room for sprinklers, exits, extinguishers and the like — I know I've caught myself doing it more than once. And I'd venture that in many jurisdictions the potential for a Brazil incident exists.

As I watched the news from Brazil play out and revisited video from Rhode Island, my mind visited those places in and near my jurisdiction that make me uneasy.

I also thought of my 20-something children and how similar they are in age to those who died in Brazil

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or Rhode Island — and how their lives mean as much to me now as they did 15 years ago.

At the next budget session or sprinkler debate, show your elected officials images from Brazil and Rhode Island. Tell them to consider carefully the morality of their choices — for budgetary decisions and ordinance votes are choices.

Ask them to consider the value of the lives of those who make up the public at public places and to be prepared to defend that value in the event of a very preventable tragedy.

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Sprinkler standoff good argument for tax incentives

by: Tess Nacelewicz - 01/23/2013

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Businesses v. Fire Sprinklers. That could be the headline of a story this week in the Chicago Tribune about a fire sprinkler requirement for businesses in the village of Westmont, Ill.

It appears businesses and the village are at odds over such basic fire protection, but they needn't be if only Congress would stop stalling and pass the Fire Sprinkler Incentive Act, or FSIA. The act would provide tax incentives that make sprinklers more affordable.

The story says that the village requires businesses to install fire sprinklers but has put that safety requirement on hold because businesses say they can't afford to add sprinklers. Here's what the story had to say:

"The village began a moratorium on the sprinkler requirement in 2010 for three years, citing that it had deterred businesses from locating in Westmont. The moratorium expires in spring and the board plans to discuss the issue at a meeting in February. Trustee Ellen Emery said the moratorium was intended, in part, to allow property owners more time to become compliant. But many businesses have not, she said, adding that building owners, not lessees, should be responsible for installing the fire sprinkler systems.

Still, trustees said many landlords are requesting tenants install the systems.

"If a building is not up to code, a new business isn't going to want to invest their life savings into it," said Emery. "There have been many cases where businesses decided not to open up in town after learning they would have to pay for the installation of the sprinkler system."

Emery says a strip mall on the south end of town is almost completely vacant because the owner doesn't want to pay for the installation of a sprinkler system. Fire officials also told trustees that 65 businesses have not installed a mandatory wireless fire alarm system while 550 buildings have. Of those not in compliance, about 55 are in the downtown area, they said.

The fire code issue comes as the village is considering enacting a tax increment financing (TIF) district on the south end of the community and possibly in the downtown to help revitalize the areas.

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A TIF is one answer that communities like Westmont could employ to resolve this issue. But that approach is piecemeal when compared to the Fire Sprinkler Incentive Act.

After 100 people were killed in The Station nightclub fire in West Warwick, R.I. in 2003, coalition of groups, including firefighters, fire sprinkler manufacturers and fire and life safety groups have been lobbying Congress to pass FSIA.

According to the latest version, introduced in the House of Representatives

THIS BLOG'S ON FIRE (AND OTHER STUFF)

As managing editor, Tess helps oversee editorial content and works on developing a rapport with industry leaders to report and write on industry news, concentrating on the fire and residential beats. She focuses on writing stories important to installers, integrators, manufacturers and distributors. Before joining Security Systems News in September 2010, Tess was a newspaper reporter in Maine for more than two decades. Most of that time, she worked for The Portland Press Herald/Maine Sunday Telegram, and also was an occasional stringer for The New York Times. Tess has a master's degree in journalism from Columbia University and a master's in linguistics from the University of Michigan. She lives in Maine with her husband and a demanding cat.

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in 2011, the act would amend the Internal Revenue Code "to allow: (1) 100% expensing in a current taxable year of the cost of an automated fire sprinkler system, as defined by this Act; and (2) accelerated depreciation (i.e., a 15-year recovery period) of such an automated fire sprinkler system that is installed in a building where the floor of any occupiable story is greater than 75 feet above the lowest level of fire department vehicle access."

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