

An Alternate Approach To Fire Inspections

By **Bob Turley**

Most fire service leaders agree that fire prevention is far cheaper in all aspects than fire suppression. The main goals of fire inspections are to:

- identify deficiencies and take corrective action
- change human behavior through knowledge transfer and assumption of responsibility

A lot of resources are required for local governments to provide fire inspections. A study entitled “The Non-Random Nature of Fire Safety Inspection Compliance, A Platform for Predicting Fire Risk” conducted by Surrey Fire Chief Len Garis and Dr. Joseph Clare of the University of the Fraser Valley in 2013 found that the majority of public buildings inspected are compliant. Over 70 percent of the properties identified in their study were fully compliant or had very minor deficiencies.

Inspection priorities are normally determined by the historical or foreseeable outcome of a significant fire event. Often the policy of the municipality identifies inspection priorities in the following order; Group B, C, A, F, E and D. Group D and E occupancies are considered low risk as are some buildings classified as A2, C and F1. These occupancies make up the largest portion of the inspections performed by municipalities.

The frequency of inspection is normally determined by the Authority Having Jurisdiction (AHJ). Through policy, many jurisdictions have a longer time interval between inspections for D & E occupancies than the other classifications because of the low hazard and low frequency of fires.

The National Fire Code of Canada and provincial fire codes place the responsibility for compliance on the



building owner. The Garis/Clare Report states the main reasons for failing to comply are that owner/occupants are unaware of the problem and lack knowledge about fire and life safety deficiencies or their responsibility to correct them. Because responsibility to comply with the fire code rests with the building owner, additional fire prevention education will result in higher awareness and code compliance.

Fire Prevention Opportunity

Most jurisdictions are looking for cost effective ways to deliver fire prevention and inspection programs. In many cases company level fire inspections are performed by fire fighters while fire code compliance inspections are performed by fire prevention specialists. In some cases, particularly in communities served by volunteer fire departments, inspections are not performed or are contracted out to third parties who are paid by the local government.

An alternative is to provide a system of self-assessment targeted to businesses that are statistically at a lower risk for fire. Those are primarily Group D and E mercantile and business and personal service facilities. Some low hazard – low occupant load Group “A” Division 2, Group “C” and Group “F” Division 1 occupancies may also be suitable for self-assessment.

Successful fire prevention self-assessment programs allow low risk businesses with a demonstrated commitment to, and history of, fire safety to perform assessments on their own, correct deficiencies and report their compliance status to the AHJ.

There has been a lot of research done on self-inspection or self-assessment programs and several reports from credible agencies such as FEMA and various Fire Commissioners and Fire Marshal offices legitimize the concept of self-assessments by building owners.

Several legal opinions from British Columbia identified that local governments should be charging for fire prevention inspections. One of the opinions suggested that programs should be referred to as self-assessment rather than self-inspection. They further suggested that self-assessment does not replace the fire inspection performed by the fire department but based on performance, allows an increased time interval between fire inspections. The BC Office of the Fire Commissioner says “Self-inspections could reduce the frequency of local government inspections, depending on the occupancy fire risk and quality of the self-inspection, from annual to every two, three or possibly four years.”

Considerations when developing a self-inspection program should include:

- necessary changes to bylaws
- policies of Council
- a qualifying standard to allow fire prevention self-inspection
- an identification process for occupancy eligibility
- data management system

- a system for evaluation of the self-inspections
- buy-in incentives for building owners/occupants
- an educational component for the self-inspection program
- an audit process
- penalties for inaccurate reporting

A system of self-assessment that incorporates evaluation of the occupancy, historical review of compliance and an educational component provides a viable method to improve fire safety in the community and encourages building owners and managers to take more responsibility for their properties.

About the Author: *Bob Turley is Program Director and a founding partner of FireWise Consulting Ltd. He is a former Deputy Fire Commissioner for the Province of BC. Bob can be reached at*
bob@firewiseconsulting.com

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