

A Lesson to be Learned

We should not let the devastating fire which occurred at Snook's Restaurant recently pass without learning a valuable lesson. In a perfect world, everything electrical and mechanical and human works properly and no fire occurs. But if you are going to have a fire, the best situation for the building, be it business or restaurant, is to be equipped with an installed fire sprinkler system. This is tantamount to having a firefighter with a hose on duty, 24 hours a day/seven days a week, in every room or area that is covered with a sprinkler head. There are no records of a structure loss where there was an operating fire sprinkler system in place.

Most residential properties today have either battery-powered or electrically powered smoke detectors that emit an audible alarm to alert individuals in the house to the detection of products of combustion indicating the presence of a fire. This is effective in preventing loss of life in occupied buildings, by alerting everyone present to the need for immediate evacuation. But this "local" alarm system does not summon the fire department. It is still necessary after the evacuation for someone to call 911. In the event that no one is in the building during this situation, the fire most likely will not be discovered until the structure is heavily involved in fire smoke, and vents itself to the outside.

For those unable or unwilling to bear the expense of installing a sprinkler system, what measures can be taken to minimize their potential loss from fire? In addition, to following all of the common sense procedures and mandated fire safety regulations, everyone should pursue having their property, again residence or commercial structure, covered by installed and monitored smoke detectors. This is a system that is comprised of one or more, electrically powered detectors wired to a central panel in the building, with a capability for the panel to notify a 24-hour monitoring center of the activation of a detector. This can be an independent installation, or it can be an add-on to an already existing, monitored burglar alarm system. Today's detectors sense the presence of products of combustion, even before visible smoke appears. Typically, the alarm is received at the monitoring center, which in turn notifies the appropriate 911 center, causing an immediate dispatch of the local fire department. Thus the fire department is on its way, literally in minutes after the initial onset of the fire, and usually on arrival can locate and suppress the fire to its point of origin, drastically reducing resulting damage.

While the fire marshal's report concerning the Snook's fire is not yet available, it appears from accounts in the local media, that the fire may have had a considerable head start before detection and reporting. A neighbor reported that she was awakened by the smell of smoke and got up to investigate. She discovered the restaurant was fully ablaze at that time, and called 911. The fire chief stated he could see flames in the sky while still two blocks away. Although, Key Largo enjoys excellent fire protection, delivered from two modern stations, by crews of highly trained firefighters employing state-of-the-art apparatus and equipment, there is little to be done for a building that is fully involved in fire upon their arrival.

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