



## COUNTY OF PRINCE WILLIAM

9250 Lee Avenue (MA230), Manassas, Virginia 20110  
(703) 792-6360 Metro 631-1703, Ext. 6360, FAX 792-6492

DEPARTMENT OF  
FIRE & RESCUE

Mary Beth Michos  
Chief

December 2, 2003

National Institute of Standards and Technology, National Construction Safety Team  
Federal Advisory Committee.

Reference: Public Comment

My name is Ray Scott; I am a Battalion Chief representing the Prince William County Virginia, Department of Fire and Rescue. I stand before the National Construction Safety Team Federal Advisory Committee today to alert the Committee of an important fire safety issue. This issue concerns the rapid fire building-to-building fire spread in modern residential communities caused by narrow fire separation distance between combustible unprotected buildings.

Traditional local zoning ordinance side yard setback distances between single family houses which had previously kept buildings more widely separated have been reduced to zero feet in many jurisdictions. The International Residential Code has the prescriptive fire separation distance of three feet from the lot line. This fire separation distance is now establishing the minimum side yard setbacks observed in many communities. Houses in entire single-family dwelling communities are now being built of combustible, unprotected construction as close as six feet apart.

Narrow fire separations are now emerging as a serious hidden fire risk. Narrow separations have caused rapid fire spread to multiple dwellings in fire incidents in Prince William, Fairfax, Loudoun, and Chesterfield counties in Virginia. Fire growth of outside building fires from the building of origin could present an urban conflagration hazard and overwhelm limited fire department resources.

Narrow fire separation in the build environment is an emerging problem first appearing in my jurisdiction in 1999. In the last few years narrowly separated single family dwellings have become the dominant housing type being built in my jurisdiction. To date, 30,000 of these narrowly separated unprotected homes exist or are planned to be built. If fire separation distances are not increased for unprotected buildings, the fire problem and risk will continue to grow as new communities are built or expanded. The fire risk could be hidden in these communities for years unknown by the residents who have the expectation the government and codes will protect them from such hazards.

I think the central question is to consider the loss of thousands of homes and tens of deaths in a day in our communities (such as the wild land fires in California) as a failure of our national codes. What is needed from the National Construction Safety Team Federal Advisory Committee is a way to facilitate more fire research regarding fire separation so code officials and code development organizations have good data on which to base code changes to reduce risk and improve fire safety in residential communities nationwide.

L. Ray Scott  
Battalion Chief  
Prince William County Department of Fire and Rescue  
Fire Marshal's Office  
9250 Lee Avenue  
Manassas, Virginia 20110  
(703) 792-6487  
rscott@pwcgov.org