

National Construction Safety Team Advisory Committee

December 3, 2003

My name is Donald P. Bliss, I am Executive Director of the National Infrastructure Institute's Center for Infrastructure Expertise - a position I recently accepted after more than 30 years in the fire service. The Center for Infrastructure Expertise is dedicated to improving the management and protection of the United States' built infrastructure.

I appear before you today as a representative of the National Association of State Fire Marshals' Partnership for Safer Buildings. In previous meetings of the National Construction Safety Team Advisory Committee, the National Association of State Fire Marshals (NASFM) has shared information on our mission, members, methods and the results of our work.

As stated earlier, we have recommended specific changes to the model building and fire codes, and we have shared our concerns with architects, builders and owners nationally, authorities having jurisdiction, and other public officials who have expressed an interest in our work.

This evening, I would like to focus on a letter NASFM received last summer from an individual who lost his home to fire in South Carolina a few years back. He had read the Partnership's report and had five questions. Permit me to read them into the record and as I do, please think how you would answer.

1. What were the model building codes' technical and scientific justifications for reducing the requirements for the protection of structural steel? Relaxation of these standards seems to contradict all that we are hearing about the need for redundancy in fire protection from the National Institute for Standards and Technology and other independent organizations.
2. For the past few years, the United States Consumer Product Safety Commission has worked with industry to recall millions of defective automatic fire sprinkler heads. Additional recalls have been announced as recently as last month. In reducing the requirements for protective coatings, were these recalls considered? Is the public safe when both sprinklers and protective coatings may be insufficient?
3. Why is there no requirement to ensure that protective coatings remain in place over time?
4. Do the model codes intend to implement the recommendations of the Partnership, and if so, when? If they do not, what other means are available to make all necessary changes to the building codes in a timely manner?
5. The safety of health care facilities and schools are a priority for all Americans. To the best of your knowledge, have the inadequacies outlined by the Partnership as yet comprised the safety of school children or patients?

You may not know the answer to this last question, but I can tell you that we had little difficulty finding three schools in South Carolina that were, or are currently, being built to the new

International Building Code (IBC) and have significantly less fire protection than they would have had they been built to comply with the Standard Building Code (SBG) it replaced.

Under the SBC, each of these schools would probably have had a 1/1/1 hour rating which, as you know, refers to the ability of the columns, beams and roof to withstand heat and therefore avoid collapse.

But under the new IBC, in the New Kelley Middle School, a 2-story 150,000 sq. foot building, the stairwells are the only areas required by the code to be fireproofed. At Blythe Academy, which is now currently occupied, only the ceiling in the mechanical room is fire-rated. This essentially means no fireproofing for a 119,000 sq. foot building housing children. Finally, at Paris Elementary School, a 2- story, building, only one room is required to be fireproofed under the new code.

NASFM is taking care in drafting our response to the gentleman from South Carolina - in part because they are fair questions that deserve honest answers. We have asked both the International Codes Council and the National Fire Protection Association for help in doing so.

But we are taking extra special care with this response because the gentleman from South Carolina is Senator Ernest Hollings, the ranking Democrat on the Senate Committee on Commerce, Science and Transportation.

The questions Senator Hollings has asked cut to the heart of the issues before this Advisory Committee. The only issue worth debating is whether people are reasonably safe in buildings. The economic issues that so often are raised are unimportant when it comes to protecting a single firefighter from the unexpected collapse of a building. If we are taking chances with the construction of schools, what chances are we taking with commercial office buildings?

Last week, Senator John Edwards of North Carolina had some questions of us on the same subject. Are buildings safe? We have our doubts.

NASFM commends the National Construction Safety Team Advisory Committee for its contribution to building safety. We are confident that our efforts, in combination, will effectively result in the improvement of building safety.