



In my opinion...

DEAN SAYS:

Do you hear what I hear?

Out in the middle of the seminar audience during the question and answer period, the speaker's voice became louder and more shrill, and his reddening face reflected growing anger, as he waved the list of NFPA Technical Committee members back and forth above his head.

"Just look at this list. Just count the names. A couple of hundred men and women spend close to a 100,000 volunteer hours every cycle of the *Code* to process public proposals and public comments, the vast majority of which seem to come from the committee members themselves. On top of all this effort, close to a hundred manufacturers submit a thousand or more products to UL and FMRC for listing. And when all this effort is finished what do we really have? Capable products and a capable installation, maintenance and use *Code* that virtually no Authority Having Jurisdiction enforces.

"Why just the other day, we bid on a job for a new hospital being built in a mid-western community. It took us the better part of three days to prepare the

quote after a thorough study of the preliminary architectural drawings, the locally-modified building code, and the fire marshal's list of exceptions. We made a real effort to meet the intent of the *National Fire Alarm Code*, even when conflicts appeared to exist between the *Code* and the other controlling documents. We were 'rewarded' by losing the bid to a contractor that has only installed the most simple residential systems. I doubt if she even owns a copy of the *Code*, let alone understands it.

"When we complained to the fire marshal, he told us that the chairman of the city council had warned him to pull in his horns. The hospital had to be built on-time and under-budget. The fire marshal just shrugged his shoulders.

"Just another case where political realities forced ethical conduct and adherence to the regulations of a nationally-recognized *Code* to stand aside. The losers are not just the stockholders in my company who won't have an opportunity to share in the profits from this job. The real losers are the patients who will entrust their lives to a hospital that has inferior protection. You can bet if they scrimped on the fire alarm system, they scrimped on other protection, too.

"The month before, we spent over an hour on the telephone with a property insurance company's regional office, making certain our bid for a multiple-building industrial job would meet their requirements. I kept track of costs on the bid process—we invested about eight

thousand dollars in trying to get a fire alarm job worth close to six hundred thousand dollars.

"Again, we lost the bid. This time to a company using equipment and software that is not listed by either UL or FMRC. When we asked the insurance engineer why his company was accepting this substandard installation, he muttered something about 'the perfume of the premium overcoming the stench of the risk.' Frankly, that old saw is wearing more than a little thin right now.

"Yes, I understood the engineer's explanation of how Highly Protected Risk underwriting is market-driven right now. I realize that his company's underwriters need to keep adding risks to their book of business in order to help compensate for lower rates, and more demands for price cutting by savvy and aggressive insurance buyers.

"Again, the big time loser is the corporation that depends on the continuity of that plant's operation, and is stuck with inferior fire protection surveillance from a fire alarm system consisting of inferior components, with questionable installation, testing, maintenance, and use. Sure, I lost money on the deal, but ultimately that corporation with inferior protection stands to lose much more.

"If the *National Fire Alarm Code* consists of minimum consensus requirements, what does it mean when most installed systems fall woefully short of the requirements of the *Code*? Maybe part of the problem is that the *Code* is riddled with requirements that have no real basis—historically or otherwise. Maybe the *Code* should be carefully combed until it only contains provisions that assure an appropriate level of safety.

"Frankly, I'm just about ready to give up. Unless I can find a group of fire alarm installers who believe as I do that installing fire alarm systems that comply with the *Code* is the only ethical practice, I'm not certain I'm willing to keep going it alone.

"Is anyone there? Does anyone hear my cry? Does anyone identify with what I'm saying?"

As the speaker sat down, I thought: "I'm here. I hear your cry. I identify with what you say." How about you? □

The Moore-Wilson
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Page 12

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