

## In My Opinion...

### Dean Says:

# They Cheated A Church!



Charlene Kidder

The caller at the other end of the phone call served as pastor at a small church in south Florida. He explained that a friend of his at a recent pastor's conference had given him my name as someone who did consulting work in fire protection. After I acknowledged that I did such work, he told me this story.

It seems that about nine years ago, the church he serves decided to build a new building on their church property. Because the architect had designed a very simple rectangular building, they decided to build it detached from the existing church building with a covered walkway between.

Their fire protection nightmare began when they submitted the plans to the local fire prevention officer. He returned the plans with demands that they install an automatic sprinkler system and a complete voice evacuation fire alarm system. He specified that they must install smoke detectors throughout all areas of the building. And, they would have to connect the alarm system to a central station.

Believing that they had no choice in the matter, they began the process of adding these protection features to the design of their building. The first hurdle they encountered came from the local water department. The church received a letter from the attorney representing the water department informing them that they would have to apply for special permission to obtain a water connection for fire protection service. This connection would need a backflow preventer and a fire protection service water meter. The water department also enforced a regulation that set the minimum size of the connection at eight inches.

When the church leaders received the cost estimate for the water connection, they gulped in surprise. The backflow preventer would cost about \$2,000 and the 8-inch fire protection service water meter would cost nearly \$6,000. Their chagrin increased when the sprinkler contractor they had hired reported that the sprinkler system for their 10,000 sq ft building would cost them over \$30,000.

One of the church leaders worked as an engineer at a nearby aircraft engine manufacturer. He noticed that the contractor had specified a 3-inch sprinkler riser for the building. He wondered why the water department required an 8-inch connection to feed a 3-inch sprinkler riser. So, he telephoned the water department. The clerk who answered his call said that he would have to submit such a question through the church's

attorney to the attorney for the water department. Since the church had not retained an attorney, he decided to just drop the matter.

The next blow came from the fire alarm contractor. The church had hired a local central station operating company to install the fire alarm system. Just part way through the installation, a very large national fire alarm company absorbed the local company. The price for the fire alarm system suddenly went from \$21,000 to \$39,000. With a \$64/month monitoring fee, the church leaders reeled again from the sky rocketing costs of fire protection for their small addition.

Upon completion of the building, the fire prevention officer informed the church that they would have to contract for quarterly inspection of the fire alarm system and the sprinkler system. The fire alarm contractor quoted a price of \$5,000 per year for quarterly fire alarm system inspections. The sprinkler contractor quoted a price of \$1,200 per year for quarterly sprinkler system inspections. To add insult to injury, the water department charges the church \$150 per month just for the privilege of having the fire protection connection. Then, the water company adds any water usage charges on top of that fee.

Over the course of the last nine years, the church had spent nearly \$40,000 more dollars on repairs to the fire alarm system. It seems that every time a lightning storm of any consequence occurred, some portion of the fire alarm system sustained damage. The testing contracting did not include maintenance or parts. So each time, the church would have to pay for new circuit boards and the labor to install them. In fact, the pastor had collected two large cardboard boxes full of circuit boards.

Now I wish I could tell you that my intervention into this situation brought immediate and prompt resolution. Sadly, it did not.

Oh, I contacted the main office of the manufacturer of the fire alarm equipment hoping that they would offer some

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### Wayne Says...

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mistake and expected us, or someone else on the design or construction team, to correct the mistake, but not assign the blame to him or her (or charge for the expense incurred). Many times, the end result is a less than satisfactory installation of a fire protection system with everyone trying to cut costs to accommodate correcting the mistake.

If you made a mistake, would you admit to the problem knowing it might cost you money? Or would you begin the finger pointing game? Or would you look for a solution that is fair to all concerned and would maintain the life safety goals of the owner? How would you respond?

### Dean Says...

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assistance. They recommended an authorized dealer to review the history of the system. That dealer ultimately ended up charging the church another enormous sum of money. And they still have problems every time a storm occurs.

I did discover that the building code that applied at the time they built the addition did not require either a fire alarm system or a sprinkler system for this type of occupancy. I also discovered that other water departments around the country also make outrageous charges for fire protection connections.

The fire prevention officer, fire alarm contractor, sprinkler contractor, and fire alarm manufacturer should feel shame for the way they took advantage of these sincere folks. How sad that this church had to waste their resources in paying for protection they did not really need. How very sad, indeed.

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