Whatever Happened to NFPA 73?

by Dean K. Wilson, P.E.

Question: Some of the old-timers in our city signal shop keep talking about NFPA 73. I looked this standard up in the National Fire Protection Association Committee List. NFPA 73 is the *Electrical Maintenance Code for One- and Two-Family Dwellings.* What in the world does this document have to do with municipal fire alarm systems?

Answer: Your question prompts a walk down memory lane for those of us who have been around a while. Personally, I started my fire protection career in 1965 in the public fire service. In fact, one of my first assignments required me to assist in the management and maintenance of the municipal fire alarm telegraph system for my community. I learned a great deal about hard work: making Western Union-type splices while hanging off the end of a ladder at 2 o'clock in the morning, for example.

Our rulebook in those days was NFPA 73. Not the NFPA 73 that exists today, but NFPA 73, *Standard for Installation, Maintenance, and Use of Municipal Fire Alarm Systems.* Interestingly enough, the oversight of the writers of this document, the NFPA Technical Committee on Municipal Fire Alarm Systems, came from the Correlating Committee on Signaling Systems. In the mid to late 1960's, George Proper of the New York State Division of Fire Safety chaired this Correlating Committee.

During this same time period, NFPA 72B, *Standard for the Installation, Maintenance, and Use of Auxiliary Protective Signaling Systems,* governed the connection of a building fire alarm system to the municipal fire alarm system. The NFPA Technical Committee on Protective Signaling Systems wrote this document, as well as, NFPA 72A, *Standard for the Installation, Maintenance, and Use of Local Protective Signaling Systems;* NFPA 72C, *Standard for the Installation, Maintenance, and Use of Remote Station Protective Signaling Systems;* and NFPA 72D, *Standard for the Installation, Maintenance, and Use of Proprietary Protective Signaling Systems.* This Technical Committee would later add to its responsibilities: NFPA 72F, *Standard for the Installation, Maintenance and Use of Emergency Voice/Alarm Communication Systems;* NFPA 72G, *Guide for the Installation, Maintenance, and Use of Notification Appliances for Protective Signaling Systems;* and NFPA 72H, *Guide for the Testing Procedures for Local, Auxiliary, Remote Station, and Proprietary Protective Signaling Systems.* Beginning in the late 1960's, Irving Mande of The Edwards Company chaired this Technical Committee.

In the early 1970's, the National Fire Protection Association decided to broaden the involvement of the public fire service in the NFPA standards-making process. To do this, the NFPA Standards Council created a series of fire service standards. They gave these standards numbers in the 1000's. At this time, they removed NFPA 73 from the jurisdiction of the Correlating Committee on Signaling Systems and renumbered it as NFPA 1221. They gave it a new title, too: *Standard for the Installation, Maintenance, and Use of Public Fire Service Communications Systems.*

At the time I joined the NFPA standards-making process in 1974, a dilemma existed. The Correlating Committee on Signaling Systems no longer had jurisdiction over the municipal fire alarm systems. Yet, through the Technical Committee on Protective Signaling Systems, the

Correlating Committee did have jurisdiction over Auxiliary Protective Signaling Systems that transmitted to the public fire service communications center through the municipal fire alarm system.

Over the span of time through the 1970's and 1980's, the NFPA Technical Committee on Public Fire Service Communications continued to maintain a high level of quality for the *Standard on Public Fire Service Communications.* They added requirements to embrace new technology. And, they developed requirements to support the computerization of the dispatching process. During this period of time, a number of dedicated and hard working individuals chaired this Technical Committee, including Max R. Schulman from Buena Park, CA, representing the International Association of Fire Chiefs, and Evan E. Stauffer from Lester, PA, representing the Navy Facilities Engineering Command.

In late 1989, as the NFPA Standards Council considered a reorganization of the NFPA Signaling Systems Project, they also had to hear and adjudicate a number of complaints filed against actions taken in regard to NFPA 1221. A Council member suggested that if they planned to reorganize the Signaling Project they ought to include the municipal fire alarm system portion in that reorganization. So, when the Council reorganized the renamed NFPA Fire Alarm Project in July of 1990, they included the municipal fire alarm system portion of NFPA 1221. However, the Council left the public fire service communication center and dispatch systems and procedures under the jurisdiction of NFPA 1221.

When NFPA published the new fire alarm document NFPA 72-1993, *National Fire Alarm Code,* the requirements for municipal fire alarm systems appeared as section 4-6, "Public Fire Alarm Reporting System." Similarly, the requirements for Auxiliary systems appeared as section 4-7, "Auxiliary Fire Alarm Systems." Both documents fell under the jurisdiction of the NFPA

Technical Committee on Supervising Station Fire Alarm Systems. Amazingly, in sort of a "what goes around comes around," this placed the requirements for municipal fire alarm systems back under the oversight of the NFPA Technical Correlating Committee on the *National Fire Alarm Code.*

By late-1996, concern had built over the perception that as a somewhat small part of the responsibilities of the NFPA Technical Committee on Supervising Station Fire Alarm Systems, the requirements for municipal fire alarm systems and for auxiliary fire alarm systems could not receive proper attention. IMSA requested that the NFPA Standards Council place these sections under the jurisdiction of a new Technical Committee. The Council agreed to this request and created the NFPA Technical Committee on Public Fire Reporting Systems. This new Technical Committee, chaired by Douglas E. Aiken of Lakes Region Mutual Fire Aid in Laconia, NH, representing IMSA, undertook to revise and improve the requirements for both municipal fire alarm systems and auxiliary fire alarm systems.

At this writing, the NFPA Standards Council will soon consider adoption of NFPA 72-1999, *National Fire Alarm Code.* A new Chapter 6, "Public Fire Alarm Reporting Systems," will become the realization of IMSA's desire to give municipal fire alarm systems and auxiliary fire alarm systems their just, proper and independent place among the other fire alarm systems covered by the *National Fire Alarm Code.*

NFPA 1221, under the leadership of Gary S. Santoro representing the Town of Wethersfield, CT, will continue to provide the requirements for the public fire service communication center and for the dispatching equipment, operations, and procedures.

NFPA 73 has definitely come a long, long way.

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