

# Submission Is NOT an Option

## In the battle for automatic sprinklers, we need a rallying cry



By Timothy E. Sendelbach

It was in the early 1990s when I first heard someone refer to the American fire service as the world's largest street gang. At first, I was taken aback; I thought of all the negative connotations that might be bestowed by such a derogatory reference. But then I saw the similarities: We're a group of more than 1 million men and women with a collaborative bond we call "the brotherhood" (and sisterhood!). We're united by a common mission—to save lives and protect property. We wear common colors, we meet and assemble at known locations within our defined turf, and we travel in packs. We speak our own language: forcing entry, pullin' the deuce-and-a-half, layin' in, aggressive attack, knockdown, VES, LDH, ICS, PIA, RIT. Our mode of transportation is distinct and our arrival is loud and very pronounced. We indeed are a force to be reckoned with, a "gang" of many, united as one.

Yet imagine reading this headline: "World's Largest Street Gang Admits Defeat! 100,000+ killed, including 10,000 of their own." Sound ridiculous? The truth is, in the battle for automatic fire sprinklers, we are not far away from such a headline.

It's well recognized that the most effective forms of fire protection are public education and prevention, but in cases of human error, criminal intent and accidents, the next best form of fire protection is the automatic fire sprinkler. It's not without an additional cost, but the fee pales in comparison to the tens of thousands of lives that have been lost (including firefighters) and the billions of dollars in property losses accrued over the last 100-plus years. We have the solution, yet many homebuilders associations and policymakers (local, state and federal) continue to put forth relentless barriers of resistance.

In 1896, five men representing competitive companies gathered to solve a shared problem, to create standardization where no such standards existed. They worked beyond their personal and professional differences to achieve something for the greater good. These men created what we now refer to as the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA). The impetus of the NFPA: the automatic fire sprinkler.

Today, more than 115 years later, we're blessed with the resources and know-how—and more than 100 years

of technological advancements—to deploy this solution effectively throughout our communities, to tame the demon that claims so many and destroys so much. Yet WE, America's biggest and most influential street gang, are on the verge of submission. We're being challenged by groups that don't hesitate to use the power of politics and financial interests to weaken public support for sprinklers. These groups go directly against the grain of our sworn mission: saving lives and protecting property. The question is, are we willing to use the same politics and persuasive facts to fight them back?

When the International Code Council voted to require all new one- and two-family residences to be equipped with fire sprinklers, we came out of the gate at breakneck speed, thinking this was a 50-yard-dash or a one-mile relay. But it's fast becoming a marathon of unforeseen challenges.

Today, I fear that what we're experiencing in the fire sprinkler battle is what marathon runners refer to as "The Wall"—a numb mind, zero energy and not enough muscle power to pull us through to the finish line. We've become exhausted, overwhelmed by the politics and financial might of those who refuse to compromise and conform to our mission.

Let me remind you, *we are the American fire service!* We're united by a common mission; we're a brotherhood and sisterhood second to none. We owe it to those we serve not to submit in what is fast becoming one of our greatest battles. Yet this is a battle that won't be won by sheer might. We must be considerate of financial constraints, we must work within the political system, and we must use facts and figures to appeal to the public's judgment. Like the leaders who formed the NFPA so long ago, we must set aside our differences and work toward a mutually agreed upon general principle governing fire protection.

In a speech after the 9/11 attacks, President George W. Bush appealed to the nation, saying "We will not tire, *we will not falter*, and *we will not fail*." Whether or not you agree with his politics, his words were a rallying cry for a nation overwhelmed by tragedy. Today, we need such a rallying cry in our fight to enhance fire protection. The thousands of lives that are on the line should be more than enough to provide that voice. 🗣️

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