

Town Journal

6 FIRE SAFETY

Town Journal Thursday, June 15, 2006

'Burn Trailer' demos fire safety

BY JONATHAN CHIN
OF TOWN JOURNAL

They're only a few inches long, but they have the power to save lives and property.

While sprinkler heads and sprinkler systems can be found in commercial buildings, they're rare in single-family homes, according to fire officials.

Area firefighters recently learned more about fire sprinklers and fire safety at a demonstration given by Vincent Fichera, executive director of the public advocacy group, The New Jersey Fire Sprinkler Advisory Board.

With the help of a 'Burn Trailer,' fire chiefs and other firefighting personnel saw how a sprinkler could effectively put out a fire.

A wastebasket full of crumpled newspapers was set on fire inside the trailer. Flames shot up some cloth that had been hung above

the wastebasket, activating a sprinkler head and dousing the blaze in just over a minute.

"I think it is a fantastic demonstration," said David Muellers, chief of the Saddle River Fire Department, which hosted the event. "I think it definitely should be shown to more people. I think it's definitely worthwhile to have sprinklers within residential homes."

Upper Saddle River Fire Chief James Levine said, "I think it was an excellent exhibition of what fire sprinklers can do in a residential setting. It's something I've been advocating for awhile, the problem is, 'How do you get people to do it?'"

"A picture's worth a thousand words. You can read about it in a book, you can see it in your hands, but when you see it actually operating, that's really what drives it home," said Fichera, an Allendale resident, of the demonstration.



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Allendale resident Vincent Fichera, executive director of The New Jersey Fire Sprinkler Advisory Board, far left, with Saddle River Valley Rescue Squad Chief Stephen Flatley, Ho-Ho-Kus Fire Chief Chris Joy, Saddle River Fire Chief David Muellers and former Upper Saddle River Fire Chief Larry Rauch at a recent fire sprinkler demonstration.

'Nobody ever died in a fully-sprinklered building. So if you could sprinkle all the houses, it would save a lot of lives.'

LARRY RAUCH

FORMER UPPER SADDLE RIVER FIRE CHIEF

Fire officials spoke highly of sprinkler systems. Sprinklers can respond instantly to a fire and keep it from spreading, whereas it can take several minutes for a fire department to arrive.

"If there's a fire on the other side of town, it might take 10 to 15 minutes to get there sometimes," said Muellers. "What this does, this type of system, it holds the fire in check so it doesn't grow, it doesn't expand."

Former Upper Saddle River Fire Chief Larry Rauch said, "It takes the average fire department five to eight minutes to get to your house from the time you dial 911."

"Sprinklers go into effect immediately," continued Rauch, the current county fire coordinator and chief of the Bergen County Law and Public Safety Institute. "You'll

have some water damage, but your house will still be there."

According to fire officials, although local commercial buildings and newer residences are being equipped with sprinklers, borough buildings and schools either do not have the systems or they're incomplete.

Ho-Ho-Kus Fire Chief Chris Joy said some portions of the Ho-Ho-Kus Public School have sprinklers,

as the result of a construction project.

He added that part of the borough hall has sprinklers, but said efforts are under way to fully sprinkle the firehouse and police station.

Current and former fire chiefs urged residents to have sprinklers installed in their homes. "It's a great idea, great invention and we hope to see more of it, especially on new construction," said Joy.

"I think they're critical," said Muellers. "They cost about the same, from what I've been told, as wall-to-wall carpeting in a regular home."

Levine said, "It's a cost issue, I understand, nothing comes inexpensive, but you can't put a price on human life. If you've got kids and you've got a large house, it's definitely something to consider."

"Nobody ever died in a fully-sprinklered building," said Rauch. "So if you could sprinkle all the houses, it would save a lot of lives."

"You can install a sprinkler system in your house," he added. "First of all, it'll save money on your fire insurance, which is a big thing. Second of all, it will save lives and property. Guaranteed."

Muellers acknowledged that while sprinklers can save lives and property, they would never replace the need for firefighters.

"Sprinklers are a mechanical system, there can be failure, they can be tampered with, they can be broken, they can be purposely put offline so that destruction does occur," he said. "So it's a mechanical system that will fail."

"I kind of look at it like a seatbelt when you're driving a car," he added. "A seatbelt works great when you use it. So does a sprinkler system. If you have it in a house, it'll work great when you use it."

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