

Fire Department Cites Lack of Fire-Resistant Materials in DC Area Condominium Fire

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Herndon, VA, July 13 - A July 11 blaze has claimed the lives of three people and seriously injured a fourth in a Washington, DC suburb condominium fire. Fairfax County fire department spokesman Lt. Mark D. Stone said in a Washington Post report that the fire's rapid spread was accelerated by the buildings' wood frame construction, which burned easily. "There was no fire-resistant material, like concrete," he said. Of the four buildings involved in the early morning fire, two were left largely in ruins.

Mark Hogan, President of the National Concrete Masonry Association (NCMA) commented, "This kind of loss of life and property calls for a greater focus on balanced design for improved fire safety." Hogan added, "Too often, we see building codes that allow trade-offs between the three elements of balanced design - detection (alarms), suppression (sprinklers) and containment (firewalls). Such tradeoffs are bad for everyone involved. Building codes which allow one or even two of these essential elements to be traded off need to be changed to reduce such losses."

Experts in fire safety know that balanced design requires buildings be constructed with firewalls that will remain functional during and after the fire, that means using durable, non-combustible materials for fire walls that won't burn, and will withstand the impact of flying debris, explosions and the stresses of fire. Vincent Dunn, Deputy Chief, Fire Department of New York (Retired) says, "At one time, a fire-resistive building was a structure that, barring a collapse or explosion, would confine a fire to one floor. Today we no longer have fire-resistive buildings. If sprinklers or firefighters do not extinguish a fire, the buildings will not confine it." This is where firewalls play a major role, stopping fires from spreading into other parts of the building.

According to Hogan, "The nation's fire statistics could be greatly improved by recognizing the important of fire containment requirements to stop fires from spreading, in addition to suppression and detection systems. That's why NCMA supports building codes that require balanced design and encourages code writing officials to require buildings to be constructed with a combination of detection, suppression, and firewalls for containment."