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Straight Talk

FROM THE VIRGINIA MASONRY ASSOCIATION

On the Preservation of Life and Property

Driven by the catastrophic power of a greater than twenty-million-dollar financial loss, the aftermath of the VCU dormitory fire has been an exercise in blame-seeking. Whether or not the building as planned was in compliance with the technicalities of established building codes, the building did not burn to the ground in twenty-five minutes because it was out of compliance. It burned to the ground in twenty-five minutes because it was made principally of materials eager to burn, and a flame worked itself into the wrong place at the wrong time. In the words of Mark Holmberg of the Richmond Times-Dispatch, "the walls were made of fuel." At the end of the day, all that remained were the masonry stairwells and the concrete first floor.

Much has been said about the hypothetical effect sprinklers might have had on the fire had they been installed prior to the incident. There is no questioning that sprinklers and other active fire control systems are valuable tools. There is also no questioning, however, that



The non-combustible masonry stairwells and concrete first floor are all that remained after the enormous blaze that engulfed the rest of the VCU dormitory on March 26th.

nothing contains and retards fire more effectively than materials that simply do not burn. Non-combustible materials, unlike sprinklers and smoke detectors, do not require functioning water and power systems to be effective.

What we propose is more widespread use of balanced design in achieving fire safety. Balanced design joins the forces of active systems, such as sprinklers, and the passive restraint of non-combustible materials. While the VMA has a specific interest in promoting masonry, other non-combustible materials may be used to achieve balanced design. Such design provides the greatest assurance that life and property will be preserved in the event of fire.

Balanced design exists, works, and is required under current codes for certain types of buildings. Hospitals, nursing homes and jails, for example, require such design. Dormitories and assisted living facilities do not. We believe that they should, and we will work hard to see that they do.



Masonry is the finest building material in the world.

Yet, knowing who you are working with is important. Why not work with a company who has made a significant commitment to improve industry practices and education? Thanks to our quality membership, VMA has become the largest all-masonry association in the state.

If the name of a particular contractor, distributor, manufacturer or supplier does not appear here, please contact the VMA headquarters at (804) 377-2080. It may be that they have been qualified for VMA membership since this letter was published. Thank you very much.

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