



INDUSTRY NEWS

Sprinklers Could Have Saved Nine Firefighters

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CHARLESTON, S.C. — A fire sprinkler system would have saved lives in a furniture store and warehouse inferno that occurred June 18 here, fire sprinkler advocates said. The Sofa Super Store did not have fire sprinklers.

Nine firefighters died battling the blaze. According to both the American Fire Sprinkler Association and the National Fire Sprinkler Association, sprinklers would have controlled the fire.

Citizens and officials in Charleston are now debating fire sprinkler retrofit requirements.

"This fire may have had a completely different outcome had the building been protected by a fire sprinkler system," AFSA President Steve Muncy said. "Because they react automatically ... [t]hat automatic action could have prevented the widespread fire growth that apparently led to the collapse of storage systems and roofing materials, where the fallen firefighters were found."

The Sofa Super Store was described as a building that was a perfect candidate for fire sprinklers, constructed with an open truss roof structure that's prone to collapse during a fire and filled with combustible furniture.

NFSA reprinted a press release from the Ormond Beach, Fla., fire department on its Website about a furniture store fire that occurred there the next day with dramatically different results thanks to fire sprinklers.

The June 19 fire at Modernage Furniture was extinguished with minor damage and no injuries because the building has fire sprinklers.

Ormond Beach Fire Chief Barry Baker said: "Not to discount the need for proper firefighter training and staffing, fire sprinklers are your best friend in controlling fires. They are efficient, effective and essential to protecting lives and property."

Firefighters were dispatched to the Modernage Furniture store at about 7:30 p.m. Upon arrival, firefighters found a small fire in the showroom being held in check by the fire sprinkler system. The fire was caused by discarded smoking material, according to the state fire marshal investigator. The damage was limited to a 10-by-10-ft. area, resulting in about \$8,000 in damage. Three sprinkler heads activated.

This is a great sprinkler success story, said Mike Garrett, building official and fire marshal for Ormond Beach.



"The building's sprinkler system did its job," Garrett said. "There were no fatalities, no injuries and a very small amount of property damage. With some minor cleanup the business will be back up and running in a day or so. This is a great example of how sprinklers help with business continuity."

Perhaps the biggest disincentive to installing fire sprinklers in Charleston is the substantial fees charged by the Charleston Water System.

According to a June 29 story in The Post and Courier newspaper, "A business wanting to install a sprinkler system with an 8-in. pipeline — the most common connection in Charleston Water System's network — must pay a \$56,900 'impact fee,' install an extra water meter that can cost \$14,000 or more, plus pay \$227.50 a month even if the sprinklers never go off."

The story quoted Mike Stewart, an installer for Charleston's Absolute Fire Protection, who said that the installed cost for a small system for a retail store might be up to \$10,000, but the fees would bring the total closer to \$80,000.

In a separate story, the newspaper quoted Charleston Mayor Joe Riley as saying that the water utility's impact fees for fire sprinklers should be eliminated. The newspaper also noted that 90% of nonresidential buildings in Charleston do not have sprinklers, according to the water utility's records.

"A fire like this is devastating on numerous levels," AFSA's Muncy noted.

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