

## Adopting a Residential Fire Sprinkler Ordinance

The adoption of an ordinance requiring the installation of fire sprinkler systems in residential occupancies can be a long and difficult process. The first step in the process is to become extremely knowledgeable about these systems. This includes technical, historical, research and data. Developing a network of resources and experts in the field will pay substantial dividends throughout the education and adoption process.

Here are some steps that are essential to success:

1. Educate fire department personnel. This includes employees at all levels of the organization. A formal training program that includes the use of some of the readily available free videos (Home Fire Sprinkler Coalition; [homefiresprinkler.org](http://homefiresprinkler.org) (*Home Fire Sprinklers: Protecting Your Community* is very good), Marble Mountain, etc.). Knowledge and awareness of the issue will go a long way in building internal support for residential sprinkler systems.
2. Through education and passion for the cause you will need to gain the full support of your Chief and Board of Commissioners (if applicable). Without unwavering support from the top of the organization you will not be able to navigate successfully through this lengthy process.
3. Begin to educate your community about the value of fire sprinklers. This can be done through department newsletters, the distribution of flyers at community events, side-by-side live fire sprinkler demonstrations, press releases that contain references to the fact that if sprinklers had been present the damage would have been significantly reduced, etc..
4. Work closely with the water provider(s) in your area regarding the water supply requirements and details. Cost is a significant barrier to the installation of sprinkler systems and the water supply component can constitute a major portion of the cost. Education of the water providers may help to open a dialog to review the engineering requirements as well as the specific costs associated with the supply to sprinklers. Mandates for dual meters, over-sized meters, standby charges, etc. can all be big hurdles to overcome. Be prepared to propose alternative water supply arrangements that have been adopted and are successful in other areas.
5. Begin discussions with and education of the City officials in regards to “risk management” for the community. Begin with the Building Official and work to gain support for residential sprinklers. This should eventually include the City Manager and ultimately the members of the City Council.

A Washington State sprinkler technical advisory group identified seven barriers to the voluntary installation of residential sprinkler systems. Those seven barriers can be grouped into three specific areas; *Education, Design Guidelines, Costs*. Each of these issues must be addressed while working through this process:

*Education:* This deals with education at all levels as noted above.

*Design Guidelines:* This primarily applies to having consistent, understandable and cost-effective design guidelines both for the water supply component (water provider) and the in-building system. It is important to stay as close to the national standard (NFPA 13D) as possible and avoid add-ons that would increase the cost and/or complexity of the system. If the design of the system in your jurisdiction is the same as other jurisdictions

in your area you will reduce the level of resistance to any sprinkler proposal and eliminate another issue for those who will oppose a sprinkler mandate.

**Costs:** No matter what is going on with the economy, the cost to install and maintain a system will be the primary issue used by opponents. Do everything in your power to ensure that everything has been done to reduce the cost for installing and maintaining systems in your area.

Anticipate that this process may take a year or longer before you even begin the process of submitting your proposal to the City Council for consideration. Take your time and build support for this important issue. Be thorough and organized. Use the time to educate yourself, build a network of resources and use the considerable resources of the Washington Sprinkler Coalition (or comparable group). Create an electronic file and load a binder with materials as you compile information and data so you can easily refer to it as needed in a meeting or educational session.

The following is a summary of the residential sprinkler adoption process that was used in Kenmore, Washington:

- Discuss and gain the support of the Building Official. (This is critical and may take some educating about the history and importance of sprinklers)
- Meet with the local water purveyor; discuss the issue and if needed educate them on the life safety value of sprinklers.
  - Be prepared and anticipate their needs and concerns
  - Propose a method of sprinkler water supply that addresses their concerns while minimizing the costs; single meter w/dual lines into house, multipurpose systems, etc.
- Meet with the City Manager or Mayor together with the B.O. to educate them and gain their support. Also use them as a resource to gauge the needs, concerns and priority issues of each Council member.
- Notify the local home builders association and schedule a meeting with their manager/president. This issue can be very emotional and the discussion can become contentious. Stay calm and focused and be very careful about what you say, they will use it against you if they can.
  - Be open about your intent and why you are doing this.
  - Respond honestly to their concerns and questions.
  - Address each of their concerns but be firm about your intent.
- Establish a stakeholder advisory group.
  - This group should include: Home builders association representative, home building contractor, sprinkler contractors, plumbers, fire service, Building Official, and water purveyor. Consider others depending on your local needs.
  - Obtain a commitment to openly participate in the process.
  - Request each member to send in a list of questions or concerns.
  - Schedule the meeting (2 hours optimal)
    - ✓ Discuss all submitted concerns
    - ✓ Seek consensus or majority agreement on issues
    - ✓ Discuss any additional issues raised
  - Schedule additional meetings as needed.

- Document meeting attendance, issues discussed and agreements reached.
- Follow your local process to get the issue on the Council agenda.
- Prepare a report for the Council.
  - You are the residential sprinkler expert. Prepare a clear proposal for their consideration.
  - Focus on a specific reason that fits with the goals of the Council; i.e life safety/community risk reduction. But also include information about firefighter safety, property protection, Green aspects of sprinklers, etc.
  - Address the costs and be prepared to talk about offset builder and community savings.
  - You may want to schedule speakers on specific sprinkler benefits at this meeting to provide a well rounded education for the Council.
- Make your presentation at the Council meeting.
  - Present the issue in an informational/educational manner. Do not request or expect a vote at this meeting.
  - Take questions and input from the Council. Write down each question for a written response later. You must be well prepared for this presentation, anticipate what the Council questions will be and have answers ready.
- In the days following the Council meeting review and respond to all of their concerns. These will be included in the report to Council preceding the next meeting.
- Schedule the issue on another Council meeting agenda. Submit a new report to Council that addresses each concern raised at the first meeting (both from Council and other in attendance) and reinforces your original proposal and reasons.
- Prior to the meeting arrange for speakers to present at the meeting to support your position on this issue.
- Do not push for a vote unless you believe that you have the numbers in your favor. Many Councils will not allow an issue that has received a NO vote to be brought back for consideration for at least 6 to 12 months. Be patient and persistent. Decide in advance what type of compromises you can support. Things can happen quickly at the meeting and you must be able to adapt and steer the conversation toward the outcome that you desire.

**Source:** Jeff LaFlam, [Washington Sprinkler Coalition](#)