

Canadian APARTMENT *Magazine*

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Apartment Building Fire Safety Plans

Critical protection for the apartment industry

By Mike Laurie

Fires that occur in the home account for 84 percent of fire-related deaths in North America and Canadians spend more than 65 percent of their time at home. Much of that time is spent asleep, which puts apartment building residents at greater risk due to their reduced awareness and ability to respond to an imminent threat. The great majority of fire victims are killed not by fire but by smoke inhalation, which underscores the necessity for well-mapped fire escape plans and evacuation procedures.

Fire safety plans help facilitate the effective utilization of a building's life safety features to protect occupants from smoke and fire. They typically show the inventory and location of fire equipment, scheduled maintenance records, escape routes and evacuation plans, and other pertinent information. They are important to overall safety and security and become absolutely vital in the event of an emergency.

Having a clearly articulated fire plan in place additionally ensures compliance with both legislative mandates and the requirements of local fire departments. Fire plans assist with orderly fire drills and emergency evacuations, and aid fire fighters and police. Referring to a fire plan helps an emergency responder understand the layout of the

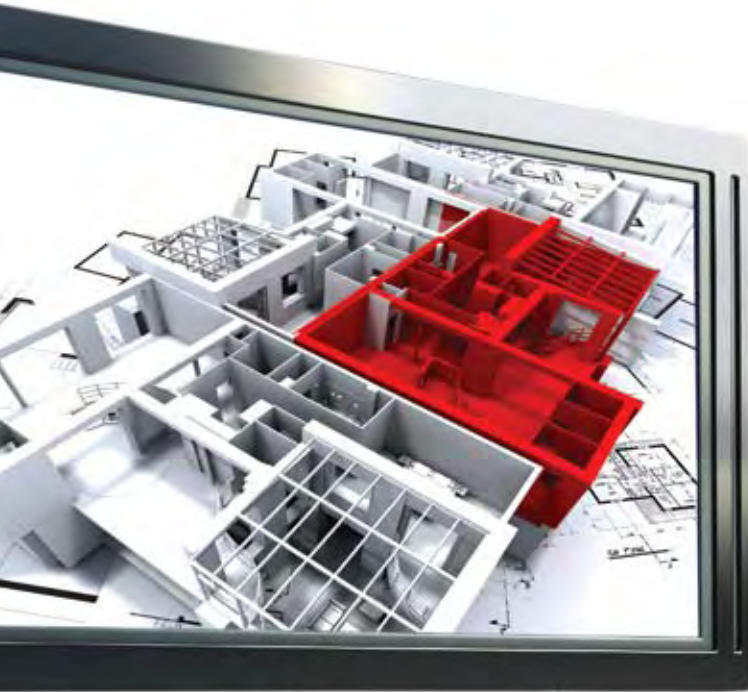
building, the location of various systems, and the best way to approach the building to fight a fire or rescue those who are inside.

The National Fire Code, Section 2.8, requires the establishment and implementation of a fire safety plan for every building containing a Group A or B occupancy – and also for those that are required by the National Building Code to have a fire alarm system. Penalties for noncompliance include stiff fines and imprisonment. Because of how the laws are written, potentially liable parties include not just apartment building owners but also building management companies, maintenance staff, and tenant organizations.

But even if they were not compulsory, fire plans are an essential resource for anyone in the apartment investment or management business. Without a comprehensive and updated fire plan, the risk of fire hazards naturally accelerates. But so does the threat of dangerous exposure to various criminal and civil liabilities that can virtually wipe out the assets of apartment industry professionals and their corporations.

Fortunately for Canadian owners, managers and tenants, Canada now offers some of the most technologically





advanced fire plan designing processes. In fact, Canada has shown uncommon leadership in this regard as the first country in the world to create Web-enabled fire plan applications.

With the help of digital technologies that take advantage of powerful online capabilities, the entire fire plan process is simplified and streamlined. Today fire plans created with these new Internet-based platforms are more flexible, agile, and adaptable. Plus, they are surprisingly economical – both in terms of their cost and their efficiency. Creating, maintaining, and updating digitized fire plans is easier and less labor intensive, which reduces the frustration and time involved in developing and managing documents, evacuation drawings, schematic layouts, and floor plans.

One centralized and integrated system can store and sort all the required documents and put them within reach with a few clicks of a computer mouse. Some fire plan software even provides dynamic document features that can actually modify themselves based on jurisdiction, usage, and building type. That means that, for example, an existing fire plan can be quickly altered or tailored to accommodate renovations, remodelling, new infrastructure, or the addition of emergency equipment such as sprinkler and alarm systems.

Perhaps the most important and exciting feature of the forward-thinking Web-enabled plans is that they are instantly available and downloadable by fire departments. As soon as a fire is reported, fire fighters can gain wireless access to valuable information about the specific location and building environment. As the fire truck is en route to the scene, for instance, fire fighters can download the entire fire plan to the truck's on-board computer terminal. By the time they arrive at an apartment building, emergency

responders have already been brought up to speed on a wide variety of strategically and tactically essential specifics.

The plans clearly show stairways as well as roof entry points, any access or staging areas and complete statistics related to the size and configuration of the building and its apartments. Fire plans also indicate, for example, such details as the locations of hydrants, utility shut off valves, and on-site hazardous materials – plus information about any mobility-impaired persons who are living in the building.

But current research indicates that only half of the buildings that should have a fire plan actually do. Of those that have a fire plan, only about one in ten have a plan that is updated and currently viable. Most fire plans, in other words, either do not exist or are obsolete, invalid, and illegitimate in terms of actually protecting life and property. Responding to this phenomenon, fire departments are stepping up enforcement and pushing for more stringent laws. Within the past five years, for example, the province of Ontario doubled its fine for building owners who fail to comply with the Ontario Fire Code, increasing it to \$50,000. Canada's Criminal Code also calls for prison sentences up to five-years long for building owners who are found negligent in terms of fire safety precautions.

Apartment building stakeholders are encouraged, therefore, to waste no time availing themselves of the newest digitally formatted and Web-enabled systems and features to implement professional quality fire plans. Not only do those sophisticated tools give fire departments fast access to critical emergency information in real-time, but they also generate interactive data management resources for building owners and managers. With appropriate software it is possible, for instance, to have a secure fire department interface, submit plans electronically to the local fire inspector for approval, and to import CAD drawings. Modules typically included in the software also offer customized data management and maintenance programs that extend beyond basic fire plan creation to generate additional cost reduction benefits over time.

While the lack of a fire plan is downright treacherous and blatantly irresponsible, the features and benefits of the new first-class fire plans are many. That makes the decision to create or revise apartment building fire plans an obvious goal for 2009. A fire plan project can save money and headaches for those in the apartment industry – while it also has the real potential to save precious assets and priceless lives. **CAM**

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How much will your fire plan cost **YOU?**



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