

Develop a pre-fire plan to help save
your property and protect your people



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Good risk management planning is critical in preventing fires and other loss events, but proper planning can also make a major difference in the extent and outcome of a fire.

Imagine if despite taking proactive steps and making investments to manage risk, reduce losses and protect your property, there is a fire in your building. Your alarm system worked as intended, your people are safe and sprinklers may be helping to contain and slow the blaze. The local fire department and other emergency resources are on the way. They will deal with it in short order...or will they?

Will the fire department know the most direct access and entry to your facility? Will they know where to find the nearest hydrants? Will firefighters be able to navigate a smoke-filled interior? Do they know whether any flammable or toxic chemicals are used in your business processes and, if so, where they are stored?

With a more complete understanding of the construction, occupancy and layout of your building, the leaders of fire and emergency response teams will be able to direct a more rapid and effective response, resulting in a far more positive outcome.

Most municipal fire departments will develop pre-fire plans for large commercial properties in their service areas, but the detail and thoroughness of these plans can vary. Smaller fire departments may have plans that are little more than handwritten notes and simple floor plans, while volunteer fire departments may not have any plans at all. Property owners should meet with local fire officials, walk them through their buildings and collaborate in the development

of an effective firefighting plan. Once a plan is developed, property owners and managers need to stay on top of changes in construction, occupancy or business processes and communicate any relevant information to local fire protection officials so plans can be up to date.



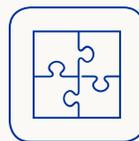


Building an effective pre-fire plan

The key to an effective pre-fire plan is the quality and depth of information. Gather all relevant information as early as possible to be prepared if and when a fire occurs.

While not every commercial building may require a pre-fire plan (as smaller buildings with retail, office or professional occupancies will not present any complex or unusual challenges to experienced firefighters), larger, multi-story structures; buildings with large, open spaces in which fire can spread quickly; occupancies with dangerous and flammable materials; and structures that may pose the potential for significant personal injury or loss of life demand dedicated planning.

A pre-fire or a pre-incident plan should be documented in writing and should include written information, maps, diagrams, drawings and any other details that may assist firefighters in responding to an incident. Whenever possible, walking tours with fire officers, and even rank-and-file firefighters, should be included in the planning process. Larger and more complex buildings should also conduct periodic drills to help ensure that life-safety and property-protection procedures are up to the challenge.



Components of pre-incident plans

The International Association of Fire Chiefs and National Fire Protection Association define a pre-incident plan as a “written document resulting from the gathering of general and detailed data to be used by responding personnel for determining the resources and actions necessary to mitigate anticipated emergencies at a specific facility.”¹ Pre-incident plans often are in paper form and carried in card files or loose leaf binders on fire trucks, though increasingly they are in digital format to be printed out at the time of an alarm, or accessed from on-board printers or a laptop at the scene. Written plans do not adhere to any widely-adopted standard template and are likely to vary according to building occupancy, but the type of information they typically contain includes:

- The layout of the building on the property, including parking lot entrances, building entrances, building key box location, hydrant locations, nearby structures, etc.
- A complete floor plan of each level of the building, including locations of hazardous materials and processes, heating and air conditioning equipment, utility shutoffs, and elevators
- Pertinent structural features such as building size, height, construction and fire-rated walls
- Description of occupancies
- Site features such as occupants with special rescue needs, unoccupied floors, daytime and nighttime occupancy loads, etc.
- Alarm system information
- Hydrant information (“fire flow”)
- Building fire protection systems



Keeping the plan current

Written fire-response plans must be framed in clear, unambiguous and easy-to-understand language to be as effective as possible. Planning documents must also be readily accessible to fire officials and should be updated on a regular basis.

Property owners have a stake in making sure that the plan held by the local fire department is kept continuously up to date. They should take the initiative to periodically consult with local fire and emergency services officials to communicate material changes to the construction of a building, the configuration of the surrounding property or the building occupancy.

Building occupancies can and do change over time. Firefighters need to know that so, for example, if they arrive to fight a fire in a building that once housed an auto parts manufacturer and they will instead be faced with a structure containing flammable dry cleaning materials and chemicals.



Regular inspections and periodic drills

If building contents and occupancies are prone to periodic change, so are the ranks of officers and firefighters staffing local fire departments. The fire chief who toured a building a year or two before may have moved on to another city or to a different role within local government. Property owners should periodically invite officers and rank-and-file firefighters of the local fire department to visit their buildings even if no material changes in the structure of occupancy have occurred. Fresh, direct knowledge of a building can be the most important factor in saving lives and minimizing damage during a major fire.

Regular visits will be especially important in areas where volunteer fire departments and their leaderships may change more frequently than professional suburban and metropolitan departments.

Not every fire department will arrange these types of visits, but building owners should welcome them when possible. The largest and most complex buildings, and especially those with the highest potential for lost lives, can benefit from drills by local firefighters.





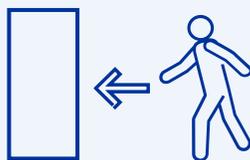
Pre-fire planning by owners and occupants

An effective pre-fire plan involves not only the fire department, but also owners and occupants. A common practice is to appoint and train building fire wardens and to hold periodic drills to help assure that people will quickly and safely evacuate a building. It is also important to identify and assign individuals who will hold the responsibility to notify the fire department in the event of a fire. Typically, this task will be specifically assigned to individuals likely to be in the building at all hours to assure that notification will take place immediately and in the most efficient and effective manner.

Some facilities may have equipment that needs to be shut down, both to limit damage to equipment and to reduce potential hazards from flowing liquids or gases under pressure. As part of the planning process, building owners and managers should consult with fire officials to determine what is expected of them and building occupants during an emergency, including the need to shut down certain pieces of machinery.

In some cases, overburdened fire departments may lack the resources or time to physically inspect buildings, making owner-occupant self-inspections an economical and efficient alternative. Building owners or occupants should contact local fire departments to determine whether they may obtain inspection or property survey forms that can help to provide firefighters with the information they need to safely and effectively respond to a blaze.

While they are useful, self-inspections cannot be as effective or comprehensive as direct knowledge of a building, so owners of larger properties still should invite inspections by local fire officers in addition to any self-inspections.



Evacuate Building

Train building fire wardens to hold periodic drills to help assure that people will quickly and safely evacuate a building.



Notify Fire Department

Identify and assign individuals who will hold the responsibility to notify the fire department.



Shut Down Machinery

Some facilities may have equipment that needs to be shut down during emergency situations.



Location considerations

A key part of the planning process for owners of large buildings or those with potentially hazardous occupancies or characteristics will be to assess the local fire department's capabilities. A large facility located in a relatively remote area served by a small town or volunteer fire department must take the local department's capabilities into account when formulating a fire response plan. The National Fire Protection Association provides a fire department evaluation form for this purpose.

If necessary and possible, owners may be able to augment the local fire department's capacity through the development of an employee fire brigade (sometimes called an industrial fire brigade) staffed by individuals who have received the same training as local firefighters. The employee fire brigade would have access to the same pre-fire response plan provided to the local fire department and would collaborate with the department in responding to a fire event.

In addition, local conditions and terrain where a building is located may present additional dimensions in the development of a pre-fire plan. Facilities located in areas where fast-moving wildfires may present a potential hazard will have special considerations for both property protection and life safety. So too will facilities located inside or at the margins of forest boundary areas present in many suburbs and "exurbs." What steps can be taken during construction or retrofitting to harden a property against external fire threats? What conditions might signal the need for immediate employee evacuations?



Being proactive can save property and lives

Taking proactive, prudent risk management steps to prevent fires and other loss events is essential for all commercial property owners. However, as unlikely as a major fire may seem, it is vital for owners and occupants to consider and plan for action should the worst occur. Property owners should be persistent in connecting with local fire departments to make sure that pre-fire plans are in place and up to date. This is especially true in areas with smaller, largely volunteer fire departments where planning is typically not pursued as rigorously as in highly populated areas with paid professional firefighters. In most cases, fire officials are pleased to work with building owners that take an active interest in fire protection.

When requesting an overtaxed fire department to develop, upgrade or update a pre-fire plan, building owners should help the process as much as possible by assembling information in advance of a meeting. If available, the types of useful information building owners should compile prior to meeting with a fire officer would include:

- Blueprints
- Floor plans
- Aerial photographs of the property
- A list of building occupants with descriptions of their businesses
- The number of people typically in the building, both during the day and at night, and where they are likely to be located
- Information on heating, air conditioning and other utility systems
- Information on sprinkler and fire alarm systems
- Lists of hazardous materials, including quantities and locations

Conclusion

Pre-incident planning should be a joint venture between the fire department and the property management team. A fire officer may be the expert in fire safety and firefighting, but the property management personnel are the experts on the building. The planning process must necessarily be collaborative and ongoing. Building owners and managers should be prepared to fulfill their roles in the joint venture, and they should expect responsiveness and professionalism from fire department representatives in developing a plan. A successful collaboration can save lives and property.



1 "Fire Officer: Principles and Practice" Third edition. International Association of Fire Chiefs / National Fire Protection Association. 2016. Ward, Michael.

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