

Getting Ahead of the Curve on Upcoming Fire Door Inspections

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Mandated fire door inspections are just around the corner. The latest requirements of NFPA 80-2007, on track to be referenced in the 2009 edition of the International Building and Fire Code, will require annual inspection of fire doors once adopted by a state. Rather than wait until inspections become mandatory, Georgia State University decided to get a head start on what would be a big project for any institution.

Georgia State University (GSU) was founded in 1913 and is located in the heart of downtown Atlanta. Today it serves more than 27,000 undergraduate and graduate students. Because of its location, the University has grown by taking over some existing buildings and has continuously built new facilities to accommodate our growth. Other buildings were built by GSU many years ago. Through the years, various repairs and renovations have been made. Three or four years ago, we did a fire door project that upgraded several hundred doors.

At a Door & Hardware Institute meeting in Atlanta, a speaker outlined the new code provisions and their requirement for annual inspection of fire doors. These requirements were adopted and published by the National Fire Protection Association, in the form of NFPA 80-2007. Shortly, NFPA 80-2007 will be brought into the 2009 editions of the Building and Fire Codes. Once adopted by a state, these requirements become binding and enforceable. This is likely to occur by 2010.

Following the meeting, I thought about all the fire doors in our sixty major downtown buildings. The buildings hold a lot of students, with up to 100 people in some classrooms. We take our responsibility for the students, faculty, staff and visitors seriously. With this responsibility and the certainty of the inspection requirement, we decided to move ahead as

soon as possible instead of waiting for inspections to become mandatory. There is an ongoing funding allocation available to us for meeting code regulations, and we had been planning to fix some more doors. With the knowledge of the code changes, we realized there was a provision that allowed us to inspect only one-third of the doors each year if we kept good records that proved we had maintained the fire doors properly. This creates a three-year inspection cycle, as long as you keep records of the work done on each door and don't do anything that brings it out of compliance.

We already had a good start on a records system, since all our doors are identified and numbered in the Archibus system, a widely used facilities management software program that GSU uses. While not yet fully populated with the needed door data, it and our Autocad® program contain many details on the size and construction of each door, its hardware, any windows or special configurations and related information.

With this solid base as a start, I realized we could segregate the fire door listings and bring them up to date, using the form indicated by the code to collect the information. This is a work in progress. When completed, it will allow the fire marshal or Authority Having Jurisdiction (AHJ) to determine the condition of each door and verify that it was properly inspected by a certified individual, along with any corrective actions that were taken.

As a first step toward this goal, we had a certified inspector begin inspecting the doors and recording details on their condition. We first concentrated on those of greatest importance in case of an actual fire. These include stairwell doors and main lobby doors, for example. The inspector and his team inspected about 170 doors in five buildings. They performed operational tests, took photos, checked the labels, noted the window size if any, recorded the kind of hinges and other hardware, and noted the condition of the door and its hardware. So we could transfer this information to our system, they put it on a disc.

In order to increase the awareness among our maintenance people of the importance of following fire door codes, they have been attending new programs about fire regulations.

Recently we attended a Fire Marshal's training program, in which the participants usually are AHJs, fire marshals, chiefs of police and fire chiefs. It was an eye-opener for them as well as for our people, because they all got to see the other side of the picture. I think it helped get the message to everyone that this is a good thing.

Back on campus, we looked at ways to increase our knowledge of codes, including making sure that contractors are aware of the codes. Of course, any repairs or renovations will be noted in our records so they are available to us and the inspectors when the code goes into effect.

Since we met with the fire marshals, our maintenance people have a new understanding of the importance of following fire door codes when they adjust, repair or install replacement hardware.

Just as important, we have created a record-keeping system that will help us track our fire doors beyond the scope of any one person. The ongoing records will be expanded as we inspect more doors and keep up-to-date with repairs and renovations. This will allow the fire marshal or AHJ to look at the records and determine the rating and hardware for a specific door, as well as the work that was done on it.

We expect the system to save a lot of work in the long run. Once we record the information on a door including the records of inspection and work done to it, we can better monitor these doors on a regular basis.. This plan would be workable even for a smaller facility, because the owner would still only have to inspect one-third of the doors each year if proper records were kept. It not only saves the cost of inspecting all the doors every year, but it also ensures that they are all functioning the way they are supposed to and protecting both the buildings and their occupants.

PHOTO INFORMATION:

Accompanying photos show several buildings on the GSU campus in Atlanta.

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