

SCHULTE & ASSOCIATES

Building Code Consultants
880D Forest Avenue
Evanston, IL 60202
fpeschulte@aol.com
847/866-7479

SEPTEMBER 11TH, THE ECONOMY AND BUILDING SAFETY

By Richard Schulte

To some, perhaps most, the events of September 11th seem like a distant memory, but everywhere you look in the United States, you still see “fall-out” from that day in September 2001. To many, the most evident example of “fall-out” are the security measures at our airports, but there are numerous other examples as well—changes to the banking system, changes in parking regulations near Federal office buildings and other important public buildings and changes in security precautions for those who enter tall buildings, attend large sporting events or utilize public transportation facilities. No doubt, there are thousands of other examples of other new security measures that have been instituted of which we are not even aware.

To some, perhaps most, the events of September 11th seem like a distant memory. . .

The greatest impact on our lives here in the United States due to 9/11 is not the increased security, however. There is a direct connection between the terror attacks in Lower Manhattan and on the Pentagon and the state of the world economy today. Recall that in the immediate aftermath of 9/11, the US economy virtually stopped in its tracks, the stock market nose-dived and the future looked pretty bleak. In order to help the economy out of its doldrums, the Federal Reserve lowered interest rates and kept them low for an extended period of time in order to minimize the economic damage of the terror attack.

. . .the Federal Reserve lowered interest rates and kept them low for an extended period of time in order to minimize the economic damage of the terror attack.

Lowering interest rates for an extended amount of time set the stage for the “housing bubble” and that, along with Government policy designed to increase the percentage of home ownership in the US, got us into the economic mess we’re now experiencing. Of course, as the US economy goes, so goes most of the world economy.

Would the housing bubble have occurred if 9/11 had never happened?

Would the housing bubble have occurred if 9/11 had never happened? We'll never know the answer to the question, but it would seem both reasonable and logical to assert that there is a connection between 9/11 and the "housing bubble" and since the bursting of the "housing bubble" in the US is in good part responsible for the "Great Recession", concluding that 9/11 is directly responsible for today's economy both in the US and in Europe is not too far of a "stretch".

Given that this website is devoted to discussions of the fire safety and fire protection provisions contained in building codes, it is not my intention of addressing the US economy or the world economy, or how to fix the mess we find ourselves in at present, so let's bring this discussion back to fire safety and fire protection.

An interesting opinion piece on our response to terrorism since 9/11 appeared in *The Washington Post* on September 12, 2010. The commentary, written by Ted Koppel, is titled "*Nine years after 9/11, let's stop playing into bin Laden's hands*". Here are a few excerpts from Koppel's commentary:

"The attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, succeeded far beyond anything Osama bin Laden could possibly have envisioned."

"The goal of any organized terrorist attack is to goad a vastly more powerful enemy into an excessive response. And over the past nine years, the United States has blundered into the 9/11 snare with one overreaction after another."

"The goal of any organized terrorist attack is to goad a vastly more powerful enemy into an excessive response. . ."

"But the insidious thing about terrorism is that there is no such thing as absolute security. Each incident provokes the contemplation of something worse to come."

"In a 2004 video message, he [referring to Osama bin Laden] boasted about leading America on the path to self-destruction. "All we have to do is send two mujaheddin . . . to raise a small piece of cloth on which is written 'al-Qaeda' in order to make the generals race there, to cause America to suffer human, economic and political losses."

Looking back over these last 9 years, it seems that Koppel's commentary is both a reasonable and logical analysis of the United States' reaction to 9/11.

Within 6 months of 9/11, the Congressional Science Committee held hearings on the collapse of the World Trade Center towers. The purpose of the Science Committee's hearings was to discuss whether the collapse of the WTC towers should be the subject of an in-depth study by the National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST). In those hearings, the director of NIST, Dr. Arden Bement, Jr., promised that NIST would not only study the collapse of the World Trade Center towers, but also devise concepts and means of how to address terrorism in the design of buildings, in particular tall buildings.

In those hearings, the director of NIST, Dr. Arden Bement, Jr., promised that NIST would not only study the collapse of the World Trade Center towers, but also devise concepts and means of how to address terrorism in the design of buildings, in particular tall buildings.

Roughly three years after the authorization of the funding for the NIST investigation into the collapse of the World Trade Center towers by Congress, NIST released its final report on its investigation. Despite the promises made by the director of NIST at the Congressional Science Committee hearings in early March 2002, the lead investigator for the NIST study, Dr. Shyam Sunder, announced that the recommendations contained in NIST's report would not address the issue of building design for terrorism at a presentation at the American Institute of Architects (AIA) meeting in Las Vegas in May 2005.

Instead of addressing the issue of terrorism in building design, NIST couched their recommendations in terms of a need to address simultaneously occurring "multiple hazards", without explicitly defining the term "multiple hazards". In other words,

In the private sector, this tactic is referred to as "bait and switch".

NIST promised the Congressional Science Committee that it would address the issue of terrorism in building design, and then substituted recommendations to address "multiple hazards". In the private sector, this tactic is referred to as "bait and switch".

Given the safety record of tall buildings in the United States, the NIST recommendations were essentially rejected by much of the private sector. However, since the private sector has little say in the building code development process, the International Code Council (ICC) adopted many of the proposals which were based upon the NIST recommendations. Will the new code provisions addressing the design and construction of tall buildings actually significantly increase the level of safety in tall buildings or will these new code provisions have little impact on the safety of tall buildings, aside from greatly increasing building construction costs?

It would seem that the private sector believes that the answer to that question is the latter, and, if that is the case, then our Government has once again “shot itself in the foot”.

It would seem that Koppel’s commentary in *The Washington Post* applies to this situation. Given the implementation of NIST’s recommendations for making tall buildings “safer”, it would appear that we have unintentionally fallen into bin Laden’s trap.

While it would be nice if we could provide all of our citizens absolute protection against future terrorist attacks, most of us realize that that’s simply not possible. As a nation, we need to accept the fact that the United States is a “target rich” environment and that it is simply not possible to protect every potential “target” of terrorism.

If we try to protect every potential “target” of terrorism, we will certainly bankrupt this nation.

If we try to protect every potential “target” of terrorism, we will certainly bankrupt this nation. Bankrupting the nation in an attempt to make America absolutely safe from terrorism accomplishes what the terrorists intended.

Given the above, we need to ask ourselves: was the implementation of the NIST recommendations just another over-reaction to the events of 9/11? There seems to be little doubt, at least in my mind, that that is the case.

. . . was the implementation of the NIST recommendations just another over-reaction to the events of 9/11?

The adoption of the NIST recommendations for improving the level of safety of our tall buildings by itself won’t bankrupt the United States, but in combination with all of our other unnecessary expenditures on counter-terrorism, the future does indeed look rather bleak. There is nothing worse than defeating yourself out of fear of what your opponent might do.

It’s time to “buck up” America.

* * * * *

Copyright © 2010 Richard C. Schulte
All Rights Reserved