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## PUBLIC FIRE PROTECTION AND THE ECONOMY

By Richard Schulte

*“Do you hear that? [Silence (no sirens).] That’s the sound of fire prevention working.”*

### Fire Marshal Tom Linkowski, Evanston Fire Department

In early 2011, at least three states, California, Illinois and New York, are teetering on the brink of bankruptcy. In California, the four largest cities in the state, Los Angeles, San Diego, San Jose and San Francisco, are in dire financial straits. Both the cities of New York and Chicago are in similar dire financial circumstances as California’s largest cities.

While the new governor of the State of New York appears to be ready to address that state’s financial problems with budget cuts, the same approach taken in the State of New Jersey, the State of Illinois has instead chosen to dramatically increase taxes on both its citizens and businesses that operate in the state. Just a few days ago, the Illinois State Legislature voted to increase the state income tax 66 percent, from a 3 percent flat rate to 5 percent, and also increase the corporate tax substantially.

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Interestingly enough, Chicago’s mayor for the last 22 years, Mayor Richard M. Daley, has openly expressed his opposition to both the increases in the state income tax rate and the corporate tax rate. Mayor Daley stated that it is simply not good fiscal policy to raise taxes in a deep recession and that the tax increases will simply drive residents and businesses out of the state. The Mayor’s comments are simply common sense.

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In sharp contrast to the financial woes of the State of Illinois, Illinois' neighbor to the east, the State of Indiana, has a balanced budget and is in sound financial shape. The Governor of Indiana yesterday referred to the State of Illinois as a dysfunctional family and likened the state to the "Simpson's family".

Given the State of Illinois' financial problems, the City of Chicago cannot look to the State for a "bail-out" from its financial troubles. While Mayor Daley will be leaving office in a few months, the Mayor's successor will have little choice but to cut the City's budget. Increasing taxes on Chicagoans, after the State's increases in taxes on its citizens, simply does not appear to be a viable option to addressing Chicago's financial problems.

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Given that this column is devoted to the issues of fire safety and fire protection, let's bring this column back on topic. With cuts in the City of Chicago's budget looming, there is little chance that the budget cuts will not impact the operations of the Chicago Fire Department. How big of an impact on fire department operations will depend upon the size of the cuts.

In other fire departments facing cuts in the budget, fire department management has made a decision to curtail fire prevention and public education activities while maintaining or reducing the impact of the cuts on fire suppression personnel. From a management standpoint, there is some logic to this approach. After all, the bulk of the interface of the fire department with the public is with the suppression forces, not fire prevention personnel. When is the last time you've seen the fire prevention personnel doing an inspection or issuing a permit on the 10 o'clock news? It is doubtful that you've ever seen that. More often than not, the only time you hear about the fire prevention personnel is if personnel are caught being involved in bribery (e.g., the Mirage Tavern sting in Chicago in 1977/1978).

While curtailing the fire prevention and public education activities seems logical from a public relations standpoint, from the standpoint of the mission of the fire department, reducing or eliminating fire prevention activities is the last place where cuts should be made. In fact, a solid case can be made that fire prevention activities should be increased when a fire department's budget is cut. Successful fire prevention activities reduce, or can sometimes even eliminate the need for suppression activity.

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The statistics collected by the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) clearly show that the number of structure fires occurring in the United States is steadily declining (a 50+ percent decrease since 1977). These statistics clearly indicate that our fire prevention activities have been successful.

The NFPA statistics also clearly show that the fire fatalities occurring in the United States are steadily declining. The reason for the decline in the number of fire fatalities is due to improved private fire protection (primarily smoke detectors and sprinkler protection) and, of course, fewer fires. Improvements in fire department fire suppression have had little to do with the large decrease (also 50+ percent since 1977) in the number of fire fatalities which occur.

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In the last decade, the reliability of sprinkler protection has been challenged by the manufacturers of passive fire protection products. While sprinkler protection is not 100 percent reliable, NFPA studies on the reliability of sprinkler protection indicate that sprinkler protection is capable of successfully controlling 90+ percent of fires (large enough to activate sprinklers) which occur in buildings. Recently published studies on the use of residential sprinkler protection in Scottsdale, Arizona and in Prince George's County, Maryland indicate that providing sprinkler protection in dwellings is capable of eliminating fire fatalities in dwellings (where 96 percent of structure fire fatalities actually occur).

Given the above, it seems obvious that the way for the Chicago Fire Department to maintain the level of fire protection provided for the citizens of Chicago in the face of budget cuts is to increase fire prevention activities. That will mean that some personnel involved in fire suppression will need to be reassigned to fire prevention activities.

Fire prevention activity is a far more cost-effective and cost-efficient means of providing public fire protection, than is manual fire suppression. Preventing a fire from occurring, or limiting the fires impact utilizing built-in fire protection is just as heroic as rescuing some one from the third floor of an apartment building.

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Unfortunately, the news media seldom notices when a fire is controlled by the activation of a single sprinkler, or when the occupants of an apartment building escape because of the activation of a smoke detector. Watching a smoke detector sound an alarm or one sprinkler activating and controlling or extinguishing a fire simply isn't as exciting as seeing big red trucks with sirens rushing to the scene and fire fighter deploying hose and streams.

What is needed in the fire service, and in the public's mind, is a change in thinking. Every time the big red trucks arrive at a fire scene and hose and streams are deployed should be considered to be a failure and should be considered to be unacceptable. Success in the fire service needs to be re-defined as a lack of need for manual fire fighting.

At least, that's my vision of the fire service and my profession. No more big red trucks-sounds boring. That's just the way Chief Linkowski liked it.

Fire prevention will never be a complete substitute for the need for fire suppression personnel. There will always be vehicle fires, wildland fires, hazardous material spills, rescues and EMS, but every fire department should strive to eliminate major structure fires and the only way to do that is through fire prevention.

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**Editor's Note:** *Richard Schulte is a 1976 graduate of the fire protection and safety engineering program at the Illinois Institute of Technology (IIT) in Chicago. Schulte worked as the fire protection engineer for the San Jose (California) Fire Department from 1980-1982. Schulte was named as one of ENR's "Top 25 Newsmakers of 2004" by Engineering News-Record for his work on critiquing the National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST) investigation into the collapse of the World Trade Center towers on 9/11.*