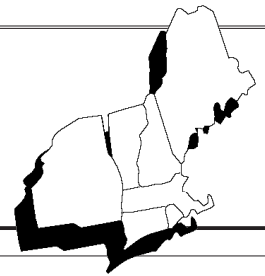


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Sprinkler wars rage in Mass.

Two Massachusetts towns have become representative battlegrounds in the escalating war between fire departments and builders over fire sprinklers in single-family homes.

In Egremont, the town meeting passed a sprinkler bylaw, only to have it overturned by the state review board when local home builders appealed. Meanwhile, nearby West Stockbridge still has its sprinkler ordinance in place, despite home builders' objections.

Both bylaws were passed when the volunteer fire departments said they could not guarantee fire protection for the growing number of new homes. The towns are in the Berkshire Hills of western Massachusetts, which is a desirable rural area that has experienced substantial population growth in recent years.

Local fire officials had nightmare visions of distant houses burning for several minutes before they could respond. Most house fires become lethal five to ten minutes after starting.

Sprinklers were the best solution, according to firefighters. Both firefighters and sprinkler

industry associations pushed for residential fire sprinklers in all new single-family homes. In Massachusetts, such bylaws were authorized by a 1989 bill that allowed small towns without water mains and hydrants to mandate residential sprinklers in new construction.

That law and the local bylaws, however, were fought by state and local home builder associations. Those associations typically argue that sprinkler piping in attics could freeze; sprinklers don't work if there is an electrical failure; they're expensive (about \$2,000 a house) and could shut low-income people out of the housing market; and that most fires are in older structures, not new ones. Hardwired smoke detectors with continually charged battery backups are a more cost-effective defense, say sprinkler opponents.

Fire departments note that sprinklers put out most fires within two minutes, confining damage to the immediate area where the fire started. Only four minutes later — when a fast fire department response might arrive — most house fires have

spread. By then, several rooms are filled with lethal heat (over 500°F) and smoke. Often rooms adjacent or above are already ignited. The battle quickly switches from saving the couch to saving the entire structure and the lives of any occupants.

Mandatory sprinkler laws offer towns significant budget savings, since they can minimize the need for additional fire stations to protect growing subdivisions.

All these factors came into play in the Egremont and West Stockbridge bylaw battles. The Egremont fire department made its point by staging a test burn in an old cabin. In the first burn, citizens watched \$2,000 worth of sprinklers douse a fire in less than a minute. Without sprinklers, the fire destroyed the cabin even though firefighters poured 20,000 gallons of water on the blaze with equipment worth over \$1 million.

At the town meeting, the bylaw passed. But it was one of the last items, and few people were left. When the bylaw went to the state Board of Building Regulations and Standards for approval (as all Massachusetts sprinkler bylaws must), the local home builder association convinced the board that no quorum existed at the time of the vote, and the

continued on next page



Lumber used for on-site construction will be minimally affected by this year's sweeping revision of the structural design values for virtually all framing lumber.

Lumber design values changing

The design values of virtually all framing lumber produced in North America will change this year in the first complete revision of softwood grades since 1970.

The early indications are that the changes will have minimal effect on the use of lumber in site-built homes. The new specifications, however, are expected to affect truss design, panelized roof systems, and other engineered products.

The new specifications will only apply to structural lumber 2 to 4 inches thick, and more than 2 inches wide.

Based on testing that began in 1978, the new design values will be published sometime between July and September. The American Lumber Standards Committee expects to have voted by April 18 on new values submitted by grading agencies.

The testing process involved breaking nearly 70,000 pieces of lumber at mills across North America during the past dozen years. Only full-sized pieces of lumber were used in the test,

unlike the 1970 standard, which was based entirely on testing of small pieces of clear wood.

In the new standards, the fiber stress in bending values generally rose in narrow pieces while in wider stock the bending stress values declined, according to industry newsletter *Random Lengths*. The reduction in stiffness values for wide material may reduce the length of allowable spans for floor joists.

Another general effect of the new standards will be a decline in the number of species groupings, because more species will share common design values.

For instance, western hemlock will be folded into the existing Hem-Fir grouping and a Spruce-Pine-Fir combination will be created to include Engelmann spruce and lodgepole pine. Also Idaho white pine, ponderosa pine, sugar pine, and alpine fir will fall in a mixed category that has not been named yet.

Mills, however, that want to use current species names for appearance or other marketing purposes may continue to do so.

OSHA relaxes roof asbestos rule slightly

OSHA has given a little ground to roofing industry in the ongoing battle over the removal of asbestos-containing materials.

In a memo to its regional administrators, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) waived its requirement for negative-pressure enclosures and decontamination

facilities when the monitored fiber count is below permissible exposure levels, according to *Professional Roofer* magazine.

Previously, this equipment was required (unless it created "more immediate health and safety hazards to employees") regardless of the exposure level caused by the removal.

Unemployment and real estate stats confirm reality

A staggering number of New Englanders lost their jobs last year, and many of them were in construction.

About 250,000 jobs, 3.7% of the workforce, were cut last year in all of New England, according to employment figures released in February.

Construction took the hardest hit with 23,100 building workers, representing 23.3% of the construction work force, finding themselves unemployed. This was the greatest percentage loss for any sector.

Job losses in 1990 more than doubled those of 1989, when 114,800 New England workers applied for unemployment. Together, the two years of losses have negated almost a third

of the regional job expansion that has occurred since the 1982 recession. The six New England states led all others in percentages of jobs lost.

Real estate sales in the region sang the same tune. Total sales reported by Multiple Listing Service brokers sagged across New England, dipping as much as 25% in Massachusetts and Vermont, and at least 15% elsewhere.

In general, the areas that saw the most growth during the boom saw the biggest drops as the market began to correct itself. The Boston area, southern New Hampshire, and southern coastal Maine all saw deep drops compared to 1989. However, Vermont, which saw

more controlled growth than the rest of the region, also had one of the biggest slowdowns, with sales down 25%. Vermont prices held steady, though, losing only 1%, as opposed to price drops of 4% to 6% in most of the other states. Maine prices dropped only 2.8%.

There is hope for recovery, however, at least among real estate agents. In February as the Gulf War ended, for instance, Boston-area brokers cited a distinct rise in shopping activity, from casual inspections at open houses to closed deals. One broker expected his February 1991 sales to be about six times his February 1990 sales.

Of course, 1990 was a particularly bad year. But brokers said the rise in activity was due to the very real forces of increased consumer confidence (also rebounding from record lows) and lower interest rates.

From What We Gather

Chopping rotting wood can be hazardous to your health, according to *Consumer Health Lifestyle* magazine. Apparently the fungal spores in rotting wood, which are released into the air during cutting, can cause a type of pneumonia. Dust masks are recommended.

Well water in areas with high levels of radon should be tested, recommends the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) in its publication *Radon in Well Water: What you should know and what you can do*. While the EPA does not have a water-borne radon testing program, they recommend contacting local health officials for information on testers.

Borrowers at the lower end of the housing market seem to be safer mortgage risks than the well-heeled. The Massachusetts Housing Finance Authority, which guarantees financing for families earning less than \$43,000 per year, had only a 2.31% delinquency rate through the first 9 months of 1990, despite

a recession that hit working-class families hard. The state as a whole, however, had a 3.6% delinquency rate, while nationally, 5% of mortgage borrowers defaulted.

A city shaped like Mount Fuji is being developed in Japan by the Taisei Corp., according to the newsletter *Real Estate Perspectives*. The city, which will contain between 12,000 and 23,000 acres of floor space, will cost an estimated \$1.2 trillion and take 30 years to build. In addition to commercial space and residences, the company plans to include a nature and space observation center, a recreation center, and an energy generation plant.

New-home sales scraped the bottom in January, plunging to the lowest rate since 1982. The Commerce Department reported that the seasonally adjusted annual rate in January was just 408,000 units, which is the lowest monthly figure since a seasonally adjusted rate of 407,000 units was posted in August 1982.

Sprinkler, continued

bylaw was overturned.

The West Stockbridge law, however, which passed by unanimous vote at the town meeting, was confirmed by the building board.

Sprinkler advocates in the state worry that the Egremont case will encourage builder associations to appeal every sprinkler bylaw, which would be unfortunate, according to West Stockbridge fire chief Larry Tonini.

Tonini is convinced sprinklers are the most efficient way to control fire. He points out that only the United States and Canada rely heavily on fire departments rather than sprinklers to control fires. The United States and Canada spend 75% of their fire budgets on suppression, he said, while the rest of the industrialized world spends 75% on prevention.

In response to what is perhaps the opposition's strongest objection to sprinklers — that they drive up the cost of homeownership — sprinkler advocates argue that this cost is offset by the long-term property tax savings that come from having smaller fire departments.

Massachusetts Home Builders Association (HBA) executive director Garen Bresnick, however, says this is basically a cop-out. "The fire departments are just looking for something to get them off the hook," he says. The Massachusetts HBA will continue to oppose sprinkler bylaws.

Residential sprinkler codes have been a hot topic at national model code meetings for several years. Both national fire safety organizations, such as the National Fire Safety Association and the Association of Fire Chiefs, as well as sprinkler industry trade groups, have been lobbying the major model code bodies to extend mandatory sprinkler codes to single-family homes. Most model codes already require sprinklers in most commercial, industrial, and multi-unit residences over two stories.

The residential sprinkler war, however, will continue at the local level, as towns try to reduce fire department budgets without sacrificing safety. If that movement becomes strong enough, the battle at the model code level may become irrelevant.

— Based on reports from staff and Contractor magazine

Brand keynoter at NESEA conference

Builders attending this year's Northeast Sustainable Energy Association (NESEA) conference in West Springfield, Mass., were offered a variety of useful sessions ranging from the latest in solar heating systems to the value of craftsmanship.

Keynote speaker Stewart Brand, founder of the *Whole Earth Catalog*, opened the March 1-3 conference with observations of how buildings are remodeled, the subject of his soon-to-be published book, "How Buildings Learn." It is inevitable that buildings need to change to accommodate new tenants or uses, which makes buildings designed to never change almost always a mistake, he said.

"Some buildings adapt gracefully, while others fight you every step of the way," Brand said.

He noted that often the most expensive, "high-style" buildings are the least adaptable, while more common structures, such as the American bungalow, can be easily and successfully altered.

But Brand cautioned against thinking too much about allowing for future changes in a design.

"The buildings that seem to adapt best are those nobody-cares-what-you-do-with-them buildings, like garages or pole barns," he said.

In addition to the seminars and workshops, this year NESEA held a couple of contests including its first design competition.

A house designed and built by Doug George of Doug George Homes in Dover, N.H., took top honors in "The Best Energy Efficient Home" category.

Wondering whether you will qualify for a small business loan?

First Step Review software developed jointly by the National Business Association and the Small Business Association can help. And best of all, it is free. For more information, contact the National Business Association, 14875 Landmark Blvd., Suite 100, Dallas, TX 75240; 800/456-0440.

An estimating database that includes items and prices geared to site work is now available through Timberline Software dealers. The database is available to buyers of Timberline's Precision Estimating and Precision Estimating Plus software. For more information, contact Timberline Software, 9405 S.W. Gemini, Beaverton, OR 97005; 503/644-6001.

Nine spreadsheet templates for solving concrete construction problems ranging from proportioning concrete mixtures and figuring cost to designing prestressed bridge beams are available for \$44 from the American Concrete Institute (ACI). For more information on *Spreadsheets for Concrete Design and Construction*, contact ACI, PO Box 19150, Detroit, MI 48219; 313/532-2600.

New design software promises to speed the accurate addition of specifications to design projects. Pro*Spec interactive software asks the operator questions about a particular product category until it is prepared to complete the specifications. For more information, contact Heery International Inc., 999 Peachtree St., N.E., Atlanta, GA 30367; 404/881-9880.

Tax Talk

Recessionary times: what to do and what not to do

by Irving L. Blackman

A few businesses are prospering during these tough times, but most are suffering during the recession that is gripping our country. Banks have tightened the credit screws on some businesses that have watched in horror as cash flow has slowed to a trickle. You could write a book on what to do and what not to do in the present fearful economic climate. But most readers of this column will be best served grasping three important points.

First, hang on. If you are having a tough time, so are your competitors, and most likely your entire industry. The smart money says the recession will be short. The survivors will enjoy the fruits of the good times that have followed every severe downturn in our economic history.

Second, don't sell your business now. The worst time to sell a business is during bad times. If you can afford it, now is the time to buy a business — preferably a competitor.

And finally, this may be

the best opportunity you'll have in your entire business lifetime to transfer your business to your children. Businesses are worth less during a recession. This means that the value of your business for tax purposes will be low too. How much can you give away? You can give \$10,000 for each kid, plus \$600,000. And double that if you're married. For example, if you have three children, you can give \$630,000 in 1991 (\$1.26 million if married) without incurring one cent of cash gift tax liability.

One warning: Whether you want to buy, sell, or transfer, don't go at it alone. Work with a competent adviser. You want to take advantage of this window of business opportunity, but don't make the mistake of dealing in an area where you have little or no personal experience.

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Architects get full "copycat" plan protection

Congress recently corrected an inequity in the copyright law that made it illegal to reproduce original designs but allowed building from the illegal plans.

With the passage of a bill sponsored by Rep. Robert W. Kastenmeier (D-Wisc.), architects may now seek an injunction

to stop construction or even ask for demolition of a building that is based on the unauthorized use of their plans.

The law, however, allows building owners to make changes without permission from architects, although architects are the legal owners of the copyright involved.

Computer Bytes

