

Published October 31st, 2018

Lafayette residential occupancy fire inspections nearly complete

By Nick Marnell



ConFire Capt. Steve Aubert prepares to inspect the post indicator valve. Photos Nick Marnell

properly now."

Fire Prevention Capt. Steve Aubert conducted an inspection of a Lafayette apartment complex. "We don't schedule these visits. You want to see things on their worst day," he said.

Aubert first checked that the fire roads were properly marked, and that the fire hydrants were not blocked. He saw the structure had a sprinkler system, so he checked the post indicator valve - the valve that controls the sprinkler system. It was operational. The fire department connection inlets were accessible and functioning, ensuring an adequate water supply.

"We are not allowed to go into individual apartments," Aubert said, as he inspected the indoor common areas, corridors, hallways and elevators. He found his first violation along one of the inside walls: the fire extinguisher was not stamped as tested.

Fire rated doors were inspected for smoke seals. The elevator was tested. Aubert checked the horn strobe system, which produces flashing light and a loud noise to alert those inside or outside the building. The captain inspected the fire alarm control panel - the controlling component which makes sure all systems are

The Contra Costa County Fire Protection District made several changes to its fire prevention bureau in order to catch up on past due fire inspections and Fire Chief Jeff Carman has assured Lafayette residents that all mandated residential occupancy inspections will have been completed by the end of the year.

Schools and residential occupancies with three or more dwelling units are subject to mandatory annual fire inspections. The district fell behind with its inspections after the recession due to budget cutbacks and the inability to hire qualified personnel and, according to Carman, ConFire had to prioritize the inspections, doing those that could cause the largest loss of life and property first, such as residential care homes.

With improved finances and a sharper focus on the lagged inspections, ConFire hired four new fire inspectors in the summer and reassigned two inspectors from the engineering department to help out with the backlog; it also stopped assisting the East Contra Costa Fire Protection District with fire inspections in order to concentrate on its own workload. ConFire then hired several temporary clerks to input the data for the field inspectors, which allowed the inspectors to spend more time in the field. The district also added a temporary fire inspector.

The larger staff allowed ConFire to complete its inspections of the 11 Lafayette education facilities in June and to tackle the inspections of the city's 159 commercial residential structures.

A random review of Lafayette inspection reports, from a fourplex on Bickerstaff Street to the iconic Lafayette Park Hotel, showed that the most common violations included failure to service fire extinguishers, inspect sprinkler systems and test fire alarms. Occasionally, a structure received a "No violations" report, as did the building on Bickerstaff. The hotel was cited for repairs needed on its fire doors, which must not only close but latch shut to stop smoke and fire from spreading into corridors and stairs. "We installed new hallway carpet with a higher pile so the doors were not completely closing on their own," said Nick Bozych, Lafayette Park Hotel general manager. "The doors were shaved and the doors close

being monitored. He checked for lighting on exit signs, and pointed out numerous other items that a layperson would probably never think twice about.

"Our job is to educate the property owners and managers. They aren't trained in any of this," Aubert said.

In October, ConFire saw the departure of its fire marshal, who had assured management that all mandated residential fire inspections were on track for completion by Dec. 31. Not wanting to lose momentum, Carman immediately appointed Deputy Chief Lewis Broschard as the interim fire marshal, a job Broschard previously held for the district.

"We are both working on the basis that the inspections will be done by that date," Carman said.

Reach the reporter at: nick@lamorindaweekly.com

[back](#)

Copyright © Lamorinda Weekly, Moraga CA