

September 21, 2008

Effort to Ease Skyscraper Codes Fails

By [ERIC LIPTON](#)

WASHINGTON — The nation's largest official building code group on Saturday rebuffed a push by a federal agency and real estate developers to weaken skyscraper code enhancements adopted last year in response to the World Trade Center attack.

The agency, the [General Services Administration](#), had teamed up with the Building Owners and Managers Association, which represents real estate developers nationwide, to challenge requirements for additional emergency stairwells in tall office buildings, more robust fireproofing and glow-in-the-dark paint on emergency stairwells.

But even before two of the measures came to a vote at a meeting of the building group, the International Code Council, which is meeting in Minneapolis to approve the 2009 version of the building code, they were withdrawn.

And the third proposal — to drop a requirement for an additional stairwell in office buildings taller than 420 feet, or about 40 stories — was defeated on Saturday by a vote of the building code officials present.

David W. Frable, a fire protection engineer at the General Services Administration, which manages office buildings for the federal government, declined to comment Saturday when asked why he had withdrawn his two requests to weaken the code.

But building code officials who attended the meeting said opposition surfaced this month after word spread that the federal government was advocating repealing certain code enhancements.

Instead of weakening the code, members of the nonprofit International Code Council voted to enhance it by requiring that all tall buildings install glow-in-the-dark paint, not just new ones.

The revisions passed also require a backup water supply for sprinkler systems, so that if the primary supply is cut off, as happened on Sept. 11, 2001, at the World Trade Center towers, the sprinklers will still work.

Finally, the members moved to require a minimum of 30 feet between emergency stairwells in buildings 75 feet or taller, or about six stories, to prevent a single event, like an explosion, from blocking all the exits, as also happened in the north tower of the World Trade Center.

"All in all, we have had a terrific success," said Gary Lewis, chairman of an International Code Council committee that had recommended code enhancements in response to the 2001 attack. "I am ecstatic."

The building code adopted by the International Code Council is used in at least 20,000 communities nationwide, in all 50 states, including major cities like New York, Houston and Philadelphia. Each jurisdiction has the right to modify the so-called model code before adopting it — and many do. But the standard adopted by the Code Council members is considered a minimum safety threshold that most jurisdictions try to meet.

The members did approve a major compromise advocated by the General Services Administration.

For office building skyscrapers higher than 420 feet, an additional stairwell will not be required if the building includes special elevators that can be used to evacuate occupants during an emergency.

These elevators would have to be designed so they would continue to run even if there was a fire in the building — and if the sprinklers were activated. The traditional ban on using an elevator during a fire would be lifted in the new towers.

The members still must vote on a controversial proposal that would require sprinklers to be installed in all new housing construction, including single-family homes, as is now required in a limited number of jurisdictions nationwide.