

Some Chicago high-rise owners still playing with fire

By THE EDITORIAL BOARD
FEB 12, 2016 AT 2:19 PM



Midrise and high-rise apartment and condo buildings in East Lakeview on Tuesday, Aug. 18, 2015. Chicago Building Commissioner Judy Frydland promises to bring the hammer down on high-rise owners who refuse to make fire safety improvements. (Brian Cassella, Chicago Tribune)

Chicago has 716 high-rises that were built before 1975 and are required by the city to make fire safety upgrades. But 303 of them haven't verifiably completed those improvements.

Some of those lagging high-rises are close to finished, Chicago Department of Buildings Commissioner Judy Frydland reports. Owners of other buildings say they are ready and await city inspection. But as many as 176 buildings are still behind the curve on these vital improvements. That's a potentially deadly gamble.

Let's review: The city back in 2004 set a reasonable deadline of 2012 for building owners to finish this work. Many of them didn't make it, though. So the city granted an extension to 2015. At the time, Mayor Rahm Emanuel urged owners to act quickly: "This is not like a final exam where you wait until the last hour of the last day to figure this out. I expect you to use this time to put in place a sprinkler system and the safety and security systems you need. ... I don't expect you to use the time all the way to the end."

Many owners apparently ignored Emanuel's plea.

Some tried to blow smoke at former city Buildings Department boss Felicia Davis, complaining about the expense and architectural difficulty of the upgrades. Davis didn't buy it. She sued scores of high-rise building owners who dawdled on making fire safety improvements. Some 77 building owners are now in court and, Frydland says, cooperating with the city. Another 51 buildings finished upgrades after the city sued.

The rest of the buildings not yet in compliance? The legal hammer comes down on them on April 30, Frydland tells us. That's when she says the city will file suit against scores of buildings that have failed several inspections or those that have not yet scheduled a city inspection to prove that they have completed upgrades.

"We want to finish this," Frydland tells us. "We're not going to wait any longer. Enough is enough."

We heard similar impatience uttered last year by then-commissioner Davis. There's been progress since then. But too many building owners still dawdle.

They know that the upgrades required under the 2004 law are vital to protect residents. Improvements can include enhanced voice communications systems so firefighters can talk between floors and give residents instructions. Or better fire alarm systems. Or elevators that close automatically in the event of a fire. Or additional fire dampers to prevent smoke and flames from spreading between floors. Or emergency backup for electrical generators to run elevators and lighting if a fire erupts. Or enhanced smoke- and heat-detection systems.



High-rise fire victim: 'When elevator door opened ... she just got blasted'

What resident wouldn't sleep easier knowing these systems were installed in her building? Who can forget the 2012 high-rise fire that claimed the life of 32-year-old Shantel McCoy? In that case, McCoy didn't know there was a fire in the building. So she rode an elevator to her 12th floor apartment at 3130 N. Lake Shore Drive. The doors slid open and a 1,500-degree plume of heat, smoke and gases blasted her.

That building now has completed its fire upgrades. But another fire tragedy could happen any day because too many buildings remain vulnerable.

Yes, these upgrades are expensive. But remember that under the same 2004 ordinance, pre-1975 commercial buildings were forced to install costly sprinklers even though those buildings are statistically much safer than residential high-rises, where people cook, smoke and light candles.

This slow dance to make residential buildings safer has lasted more than a decade now. That is unconscionable.

Frydland, who spent years in the city's Law Department, reminds us that she prosecuted many fire safety scofflaws. She promises to aggressively pursue buildings that don't fall into line.

Make it so, commissioner. Make 2016 the Year of No More Excuses.