

Fire Safety Inspections in the City of Lake Stevens

Proactive investment in reducing risk helps the community and commerce thrive. Fire safety inspections are a critical component to community risk reduction which includes all programs and services directed toward saving lives, preventing property damage, reducing harm to the environment, and preserving the citizen's dollar.

Background

The City of Lake Stevens entered into an inter-local agreement with Lake Stevens Fire on July 23, 2007 to provide fire marshal services (Community Risk Reduction) to include, but not limited to:

1. Fire and life safety education,
2. Fire and life safety systems plan review, and
3. Fire investigation.

Lake Stevens Fire, in accordance with International Fire Code "Section 106.2 Inspections," has established an annual fire safety inspection schedule for existing occupancies within the corporate limits of Lake Stevens. Section 106.2 states, "the fire code official is authorized to conduct such inspections as are deemed necessary to determine the extent of compliance with the provisions of this code and to approve reports of inspection by approved agencies or individuals."

On February 11, 2013 the Lake Stevens City Council voted to approve resolution 2013-1 which established annual fire inspections and the accompanying fee schedule based on square footage and occupancy type. In turn, on June 13, 2013 the Lake Stevens Board of Fire Commissioners voted to approve resolution No. 2013-01 which reaffirmed the fire districts responsibility to conduct and bill for annual fire inspections pursuant to RCW 52.12.031 (6) and RCW 19.27. This fee schedule remains in effect as originally proposed.

The State of Washington does not dictate a fire safety inspection schedule and leaves this responsibility up the authority having jurisdiction to decide the frequency based on individual levels of risk with the community. Annual fire inspections are an industry best practice.

Impacts on Business

Keith S. Frangiamore (2009) of Buildings.com provides the following benefits of annual fire safety inspections for business owners:

"While many people look at the fire- and life-safety inspection process negatively, these inspections benefit the building/business owners, as well as those who use the building, by offering:

- *A safer working/living environment for employees/residents.*
- *A safer building for unfamiliar occupants (visitors, shoppers, clients, etc.).*
- *Business and job security. Up to 80 percent of all small businesses that experience a large fire never reopen; this not only affects the building/business owner, but also results in the*

loss of jobs. Of the businesses that do reopen, many lose much of their customer base due to prolonged absence of production or service.

- *A better-maintained building for improved resale value. It is commonplace for buyers to hire a company to inspect the building prior to purchase to identify potential hidden costs related to fire and life safety.*
- *A possible reduction in insurance premiums. Some items may be required by both the fire department and your insurance carrier, such as annual fire-sprinkler and fire-alarm inspections verifying proper system maintenance. Many insurance carriers give businesses premium reductions for properly installed and maintained fire-protection systems.”*

A common concern for business owners with fire safety inspections and fire code violation abatement is cost and how a business’s bottom-line is affected. Frangiamore is correct by recognizing the implications of annual fire inspections and fire code compliance with reductions in insurance premiums.

Washington Survey and Rating Bureau

Consistent with every fire district in the state, Lake Stevens Fire is given an insurance rating by the Washington State Survey and Rating Bureau (WSRB). The WSRB rating for Lake Stevens Fire is currently 4 in the City of Lake Stevens and a 5 outside City Limits. The rating directly affects the fire insurance premiums paid by both home and business owners within the district’s boundaries. Lower ratings yield lower insurance premiums. WSRB provides a score for “Fire Safety Control” which includes fire prevention activities such as fire code enforcement, public education, fire investigation and building code enforcement. In particular, field inspections are rated on the frequency of inspection. Maximum credit is given for conducting fire safety inspections twice a year and minimum credit is given for not conducting fire inspections. By conducting fire and safety inspections annually, Lake Stevens Fire receives 50% credit in this category. If the inspection frequency were to be decreased, there is a good chance that our WSRB rating could be affected resulting in higher insurance premiums.

Inspection Items

During annual fire safety inspections, fire inspectors look for numerous items that affect the overall safety of a business. We train our inspectors to do more than just report the problem, but to become part of the solution and offer suggestions on how to correct an unsafe situation.

Some common items in an inspection include, but are not limited to the following:

1. Exit signs and emergency lights,
2. Exit doors,
3. Fire extinguishers,
4. Sprinkler and fire alarm systems,
5. Temporary wiring (extension cords and multi-plug adaptors),
6. Clearance of combustibles from:
 - a. Electrical panels
 - b. Ceiling

- c. Heating equipment
- 7. Visibility of address signs.

The International Fire Code (IFC) adopts numerous national standards and applies them to the periodic upkeep of fire protection equipment and devices. According to the IFC, all fire protection equipment and systems must be checked annually to ensure proper operation of the equipment. This is true for sprinkler systems, fire alarm systems and fire extinguishers.

Fire extinguishers fall under NFPA 10: Standard for Portable Fire Extinguishers. This standard provides best practices based on industry standards and testing for the size, distribution and maintenance of fire extinguishers. Fire extinguishers must be inspected annually by a licensed technician. The technician will check the following:

1. Check the pressure gauge to ensure proper fill pressure,
2. Remove and inspect the discharge nozzle to look for obstructions,
3. Loosen packed dry chemical powder by hitting the extinguisher with a mallet. If the powder is compacted, it will not discharge.
4. Check the internal inspection and hydrostatic inspection dates (an internal inspection is required every 6 years and a hydrostatic pressure test is required every 12 years).
5. Perform any advanced maintenance such as refill and recharge of extinguishers, internal inspection and hydrostatic inspection.

In every case, fire protection systems and equipment must be inspected by qualified professionals annually to ensure that these devices will operate properly when a fire occurs.

Summary

The performance of fire safety inspections by Lake Stevens Fire is a critical component to community risk reduction that is directed at keeping people healthy, businesses thriving and property and the environment unharmed. Lake Stevens Fire looks forward to working with the City of Lake Stevens and our great community to develop sensible programs that will support a bright future.

For more information on fire safety inspections please feel free to contact the Lake Stevens Fire Division of Community Risk Reduction at (425) 334-3042 or email us at fireprevention@lsfire.org.