

A p a r t m e n t

SAFETY NOTES

SPOKANE FIRE DEPARTMENT



MAY 2010

Safety Spots: Decks, Halls & Storage

Many apartments are designed with small decks on each unit so that tenants can enjoy time in the fresh air. Unfortunately, some decks are cluttered with outdoor storage. Others are equipped with grills and ashtrays which are two “deck hot spots” and the risk is often underestimated by managers and tenants.

Some tenants enjoy barbecuing on their deck but neglect to keep a watchful eye on what they are cooking and the height of the flames. Depending on the design of the deck, open flames can reach the deck roofing, siding and soffits and ignite a major fire. While propane grills are statistically much safer than charcoal models, propane bottles greatly accelerate the spread of flame should even a small fire start in another apartment and spread to any deck holding a propane grill. The fire code does prohibit grills on apartment decks, however the State of Washington decided to not adopt that section of the code. Owners and managers can however designate common areas *away from individual units* on the property for safer grilling spaces.

More tenants are now smoking outside their units, which improves air quality indoors but still requires careful and complete disposal of the remains. Spokane has experienced significant fire loss in multifamily residences because smokers thought that the “dirt” in a potted plant would serve as a good ashtray and extinguish a cigarette. They had no idea that potting soil contains organic material that enables the cigarette to smolder for a long time before bursting into flame. In recent years, several large apartments lost multiple units because of a simple cigarette stubbed out in a potted plant. If your apartment complex is decorated with potted plants, keep firesafe ashtrays nearby. If smoking is allowed on decks, alert tenants to the fact that potting soil will burn: it's not dirt!



The safest way to extinguish a cigarette is with a container filled with sand.

Fire codes are created to prevent repeated harm to people and property. For example, units with interior hallways, require 4 foot wall-to-wall walking space in the event of a fire emergency. That space should not be compromised by tenants adding “touch of home” decorations that



extend into the common walkway. Should there be a fire with thick black smoke in the hallways, tenants and firefighters may need to crawl on the floor and feel their way towards an exit. In an emergency, decorations and other storage in hallways can easily be knocked over and present a trip hazard or obstruction to getting out safely. Decorations that block the pathway could cause injury or worse.

Accessible hallways are also important because most fire department calls are for medical emergencies. It can prove difficult and dangerous for the patient and paramedics to get a gurney into a cluttered apartment or through a narrow hallway or stairwell.

Space for adequate storage is an ongoing challenge for many tenants. But some of their creative solutions are "accidents waiting to happen" and have already resulted in Spokane fire incidents. Combustibles stacked on cookie sheets covering two burners on a range may add temporary kitchen space but they have resulted in a completely burned unit. Mattresses, boxes and couches stored under a staircase or on a front porch have added fuel to more than one fire. The practice of having combustible storage under stairs is not allowed by code, unless the space is provided with a fire sprinkler head.

With space at a premium, some local apartment managers have used dangerous practices such as storing lawnmowers, snow blowers and gasoline cans in the laundry room, basement or other interior storage area, stacking paint cans next to the water heater or blocking access to the electrical panel with ladders, tools or other storage. These are dangerous practices prohibited by fire and building codes.

If you have questions regarding fire code requirements for your property, please call Spokane Fire Prevention Bureau at (509) 625-7000.

Safe Storage Basics

Highly flammable products (e.g. gasoline or paint lacquers) cannot be stored inside residential properties.

Fire code prohibits storage in mechanical or electrical rooms.

Attics, under-floor and concealed spaces used for storage should be protected on the storage side for 1-hour fire construction by a layer of 5/8 inch fire-rated gypsum wallboard with sealed joints.

In non-sprinklered buildings, storage must be at least 24 inches below the ceiling.

In sprinklered buildings, storage must be at least 18 inches below the sprinkler deflectors.

You can sign up for this monthly newsletter, ask a fire-related question or suggest a specific safety topic by contacting Jan Doherty at jdoherty@spokanefire.org or by calling 625-7058.



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