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## Fire Safety in the City of Menlo Park

### Issue

What efforts are being made in the City of Menlo Park to improve residential fire safety?

### Background

At the present time, plans for commercial buildings, multi-family dwellings and subdivisions built in the City of Menlo Park are reviewed for fire safety by the Menlo Park Fire Protection District (MPFPD). Building plans for standalone single family residences are not currently reviewed for fire safety. Furthermore, the City of Menlo Park does not require sprinklers in single family residences.

California law pertinent to fire, life and safety issues in residential buildings defines requirements for smoke detectors, fire sprinklers, number and character of exits from buildings, windows and basements, etc.(Building Code). Requirements for hydrant location, adequacy of water flow and road access for fire apparatus are found in the California Health and Safety Code (Fire Code).

City building departments typically review and approve requirements in the Building Code and fire suppression agencies are responsible for the requirements in the Fire Code. When a city operates its own fire department it can establish responsibility for the respective roles played by the fire and building departments. If a fire district encompasses several cities, there is nothing in the codes that delineates the division of responsibilities between the district and the cities and how the provisions of the codes are to be implemented. Such cities must individually establish plan approval procedures with the fire district.

### Investigation

The 2006-2007 San Mateo County Civil Grand Jury (Grand Jury) interviewed

management staff and elected officials of the MPFPD and the City of Menlo Park, and reviewed the Fire and Building Codes. The Grand Jury also surveyed the practices of six other San Mateo County cities.

## **Findings**

Basements are a significant risk to firefighters because of lack of visibility, risk of entrapment and the threat of a building collapse. Fire departments must be aware of the existence of a basement, the building configuration and other potential hazards to insure the safety of its firefighters.

Fire departments review hydrant location, adequacy of water flow and road access for fire apparatus to insure that a fire can be fought successfully.

The MPFPD Board of Directors voted on March 20, 2007, to request that the City of Menlo Park include MPFPD in the review and approval process for all new single family residential construction. The MPFPD Board also voted to request that the City of Menlo Park adopt an ordinance requiring sprinklers in new residential construction and in remodeled structures of 2,500 square feet or more, when the alteration exceeds 50% of the existing floor area. Sprinklers would also be required in basements of more than 250 square feet.

The City of Menlo Park has adopted many of these requests. Starting May 1<sup>st</sup>, the MPFPD will review plans for all proposed single family homes, new basements, remodels that increase square footage by more than 50%, accessory structures larger than 1,000 square feet and gates across driveways. The fire district will also review water flow, fire hydrant location and access to property by fire trucks.

Officials and management of MPFPD and the City of Menlo Park are demonstrating cooperative and proactive attitudes toward addressing fire protection issues.

## **Conclusion**

The 2006-2007 San Mateo County Civil Grand Jury commends the City of Menlo Park and the Menlo Park Fire Protection District for initiating the process of working together to improve residential fire safety in the City of Menlo Park.