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Stickers would warn firefighters of danger

Kate Ramunni STAFF WRITER

DERBY -- A seemingly small addition to certain city buildings may make firefighting a lot safer for the city's volunteer fire department. A public hearing will be held next month on a proposed ordinance that would require a reflective sticker be affixed to buildings built with prefabricated engineered lumber.

"You are the smallest town in the state, but you have the opportunity to set a large example," Frank Ricci, of the Connecticut Council of Occupational Safety and Health, told the Board of Aldermen last week. "We are hoping what we start here in Derby will be a catalyst for an eventual state law that would mirror the Derby law."

That law, administered through the new ordinance, would require a special reflective sticker be put on those buildings built with prefabricated engineered lumber, which burns and collapses faster than stick construction, according to Ricci, who also is a New Haven firefighter.

"A lot of (firefighter) deaths are because of the failure to recognize what kind of building construction" they are dealing with, Ricci said.

Such was the case on Thanksgiving Day, 1996 when Branford volunteer firefighter Edward Ramos died fighting a fire in a building built using engineered lumber, Ricci said.

It's impossible to tell by looking at a building from the outside if it is built with the engineered lumber, he said. The reflective stickers would warn firefighters they are dealing with such construction so that they can take extra precautions, he said.

Firefighting technology, in particular breathing apparatuses, has advanced to the point where firefighters can contain a blaze to the room of origin, rather than to the building, Ricci said. But despite those advances, firefighters are dying on the job at the same rate as they did 25 years ago, he said, because of dangers such as this construction.

The average "stick construction" building takes about 20 minutes to burn to the point of collapse, he said, while it takes only five minutes to get to that point in a building built with engineered lumber. And when that kind of building collapses, it often is much more catastrophic, he said, creating a hole of up to 10 feet. "That's enough to take out a whole company of firefighters with it," he said. "No department is immune to this scenario," he said, no matter how small or large.

There are more than 100 firefighters who die each year fighting fires, he said, and more than 80,000 are injured.

The stickers "would give them a heads-up and tell them what they are dealing with before they get in," Ricci said.

The cost of the stickers would be minimal, Alderman David Lenart said, and a request has gone out to city businesses for donations to buy them for existing buildings. An additional \$5 fee would be charged to all building permits for such buildings, he said.

Anyone refusing to put the sticker on an eligible building or removing an existing sticker could be fined \$25 a day, according to the ordinance.

"It is very sobering to hear what is happening" to firefighters who enter such buildings, Mayor Tony Staffieri said.

The aldermen will hold a public hearing on the ordinance at its July 23 meeting.