



Sprinkler Systems Does my building need one?

Permit & Development Center

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Prospective buyers and tenants often call the Development Center to ask if a particular building needs an automatic fire sprinkler system. Although this may seem a relatively simple question, it is not. The building code considers a number of factors in determining whether a sprinkler system is required. This customer information sheet lists the key factors.

Retroactivity

In the majority of cases, the building codes that are enforced by the City of Milwaukee are not retroactive. This means that, if you are going to occupy a building for the same use as the one which is in the building now, and the building does not have a sprinkler system, you will not be required to install one.

Change of ownership

Although there are many code requirements that mandate sprinkler protection, none of these is triggered simply on the basis of a change of ownership. There is one point to keep in mind, however. In general, the requirements that are enforced on a given building are those that were in effect when the building was constructed or when the use was last changed. If the current use does not meet those requirements, it must be brought into compliance, regardless of use or ownership change. Occasionally when a building changes hands, it is discovered that the current use does not meet the standards in force when that use began. Any compliance requirements enforced are not a consequence of the ownership change, but the consequence of a continuing non-compliant use.

Automatic Fire Sprinkler Requirements

There are a number of reasons why new buildings, building additions or buildings undergoing a change of use may require automatic fire sprinkler protection. Some of these reasons are:

- **Building height.** The requirement for automatic fire sprinkler protection for buildings that exceed 60' in height has been in effect since 1974.
- **Specific use.** There are a number of uses, some based on area, for which complete automatic fire sprinkler protection is required. In general, the code mandates sprinkler protection for uses that present a substantial fire hazard or that require increased protection for occupants.
- **Building construction type, area, and height.** The code recognizes the effect of sprinkler systems on fire safety and provides increases in building area and height for buildings with complete sprinkler protection
- **Other code incentives.** In addition to building area and height, there are other code requirements, such as fire ratings, exit travel, and areas of rescue assistance, that are modified based on complete sprinkler protection.

Questions

This customer information sheet was intended to share the key factors that determine whether a building requires automatic fire sprinkler protection. We also hope that it has given you some idea of the complexity involved in answering the question of whether a building requires automatic fire sprinkler protection.

The City of Milwaukee Development Center's plan examination staff (414) 286-8210 is available to answer your questions about fire protection. In some cases it may be necessary to obtain the services of an expert in building construction and building codes, such as a registered architect or professional engineer, to comprehensively assess current and future uses of the building.