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Residential Sprinkler Systems: Debunking the Myths

I grin as the Newlywed couple enters my office. I can already surmise that they fit right into the stereotype of Americans who remain oblivious to the benefits of residential fire sprinkler systems. As Fire Marshal of Scottsdale, Arizona, I am proud of my city's reputation as one of the greatest proponents of residential fire sprinkler systems in the nation. In fact, our local legislature passed an ordinance on January 1, 1986 that requires all new homes to implement an approved sprinkler system during construction (Scottsdale Report...) Yet I can already see that sour expression on Mr. Newlywed's face. He has scheduled an appointment at my office today to demand that his home be exempt from the ordinance, probably for the usual list of completely unsubstantiated assumptions. Over the years I have had many new residents complain about the "high cost of useless equipment" and the "unacceptable water damage" mistakenly associated with modern sprinklers. It really is unfortunate that these myths continue to mar the image of home sprinkler systems in society. As they approach my desk, I gather the evidence for my case and prepare for a lengthy debate. I am the Sprinkler Myth Buster, and I know who will emerge victorious from this conversation!

The first question arrives dripping with ignorance: "Mr. Fire Marshal, Scottsdale appears to be a wonderful place to raise a family, but your local ordinance threatens to bankrupt mine. How can you expect my wife and I to spend thousands of dollars on a sprinkler system that causes more damage than it prevents. I don't want 30 "water guns" ruining all of my possessions just because Susan lets some cookies bake too long!"

I grimace at this expected rant of inaccuracy. With practiced precision, I reply, "Mr. Newlywed, a home system only adds around a 1% increase to your total construction costs (Residential Sprinklers Described). I can also assure you that the water damage will be far less in the event of a fire than the cost of a brand new home. Over the past 15 years, this town has experienced 598 home fires. The average cost for a "sprinklered event" was \$2,166. The average for an unprotected home was \$45,019 (Scottsdale Report...). You think you know water damage? Here's some irony for you: since the ordinance came into effect, 341 gallons of water have discharged from residential sprinkler systems. Compare that statistic to the 2,935 gallons released by city fire hoses (Scottsdale Report...). I am also afraid that you are unaware of how a sprinkler system operates. When a fire ignites, only the sprinkler over the incident site activates; modern sprinklers do not release simultaneously (Residential Sprinkler Systems). A sprinkler head contains a heat sensitive plug, either a fusible metal or a fragile piece of glass, which bursts at a specific temperature. The immense heat rising from an actual fire releases this trigger, not residual smoke. Rest assured, your wife's baking will never set off a sprinkler head accidentally (Residential Sprinklers Described). And frankly sir, I do not appreciate the term "water guns." These systems are state-of-the-art, and they save lives. Thirteen people have died in this city with misinformation like yours" (Scottsdale Report...)

With such a resounding admonishment, I could see Mr. Newlywed's pride was hurt. I am sure that the "I-told-you-so" in Mrs. Newlywed's eyes did not help either. In an effort of consolation, I presented several other benefits of a home sprinkler system. "Mr. Newlywed, a residential system can actually save you money in the long run. Home insurance companies in this area and around the U.S. offer as much as a 15% discount on your

premium if you own a sprinkler system. Also, the new systems we offer today utilize light plastic piping to supplement traditional metal plumbing and have a very low water requirement that remains far below your domestic threshold (Residential Sprinkler Systems). In this city in particular, more than 50% of our 41,408 homes are protected from fire 24/7. As a result, we have become quite efficient at outfitting new homes and even retrofitting the old. The average cost per square foot most contractors require here is only \$0.80! (Scottsdale Report...).

Mr. Newlywed's ears perked up upon hearing these various financial incentives. I had a feeling that my argument had hit home. I explained, "The ordinance was passed over 15 years ago in an attempt to create a safer, more secure environment for everyone. Many communities around the nation have utilized our leadership to institute similar building requirements including Chapel Hill, North Carolina; Germantown, Tennessee; and Altamonte Springs, Florida to name a few (Residential Sprinkler Systems).

As expected, Mr. Newlywed began to see the logic behind the ordinance and his concerns evaporated as he scrutinized the literature on my desk. Mrs. Newlywed inclined her head towards me and posed her own question. "I am glad that you have clarified this issue for my husband, but I have only one point of concern. All of the sprinkler systems I have seen in the past are not very aesthetically pleasing. I know such a concern is superficial, but is there any way we can limit the impression these, no offense, eye-sores leave on our ceilings?"

I chuckled good-naturedly and said, "Certainly ma'am. Many contractors offer popular colors to match all styles. The sprinkler heads can even be partially recessed into

your ceiling as well. I have even seen one homeowner conceal their sprinklers above fusible panels that blend in flawlessly with the surrounding décor (Residential Sprinklers Described) Trust me, Mrs. Newlywed. If we can put a man on the moon, I am positive we can make your sprinklers beautiful.”

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