

From The Jas Johal Show: Does single egress stairs in residential buildings put fire safety at risk?, Sep 3, 2024

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Over the past few days, one of the most polarizing topics that we've had on this show is the province's decision to move ahead with a single staircase, as opposed to two for all buildings that are six stories and lower. Here is, and he was on The Jas Johal Show, what was it, last Friday, Housing Minister Ravi Kalan on our show talking about why the BC building code is changing.

You're only allowed four units per floor, and you're only allowed going six stories high. So, you're actually are limiting the amount of people that are in the building, the amount of distance that is needed from going from one unit to the stairwell. You've got sprinklers, which instantly make the building a lot safer, wider staircases.

So, wider staircases, but again, with the sprinkler, is that not going to make the stairs wet and hard for people to go up and down in the event of emergency? Let's just say the buzz lines from last Friday did not spare anyone at any point.

One staircase for a five-story building, what do you do in the case of an earthquake or fire? Just have people jump onto a trampoline. I can't believe how stupid that would be.

That second stairwell is there for safety reasons. People have died because there wasn't enough ways to get out of the building.

All right, so that was it. You had Housing Minister Ravi Kalan, and then we had Sarah Kirby Young from the City of Vancouver. Because remember, the City of Vancouver marches to their own drum when it comes to these policies.

And I just, I kept thinking to myself during all of those interviews, I mean, have we not talked about safety? Because they talk about this report that says, you know what, no matter where you are around the world, the people that do it with the one egress, it's not an issue. But finally, I'm going to have a conversation with the one person that I wanted to.

I wanted to get this from a fire safety perspective. Len Garis is a retired fire chief for the city of Surrey. He's an adjunct professor at the University of the Fraser Valley School of Culture, Media and Society. Kind enough to join me. Len, good afternoon. Oh, good afternoon. Thanks for having me.

Well, in its simplest terms, I know that this is great for developers, and I know this adds a couple of square feet to somebody's apartment, but what am I missing?

Well, what you're missing is that first and foremost, as you pointed out, this is not supported by any of the public safety agencies on basically in North America. I was just, I was, I have never seen anything like this, including the Chiefs of Police, Police Officers Association, Firefighters Association, every association associated with public safety in North America is opposed to this. And, you know, I kind of, that's what, that's what drove me to kind of look underneath the hood on this to see what, see what it really looks like.

And I, right now, at this point in time, I have to agree with them. This system is not going to be safely operated on behalf of the first responders or even the people that are living in these buildings. And I can tell you why.

I'd love to hear why.

OK, so I'm looking at a database that was collected when I was tenured with the City of Surrey and the Canadian Fire Chiefs Association. I'm looking at nearly 500,000 incidents that were collected across Canada, various provinces, BC, Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, and Ontario. And 23,000 of those incidents were apartment fires.

And nearly 9% of all of those apartment fires that occurred in this database occurred in an area of egress. So in other words, 43% were in a hallway, 26% were in a stair interior, and 18% were in a lobby. So all of those areas that we're talking about now that have an option right now to escape from a second egress is gonna be cut off and they're gonna be faced with a large number, nearly 10% of these fires are gonna occur in a hallway or a stairwell.

And that's not gonna give people an option or a second option to get out. So Len, riddle me this. They said that they're gonna make the staircases wider, they're gonna add some sprinkling in there, they're gonna make the walls thicker, all the things that you would wanna do when you're talking about fire suppression. But in panic, in matters where it's seconds as opposed to having the chance to think about things, this is to me, it still strikes fear in me for the simple fact that if I'm elderly, if I'm incapacitated, if my body doesn't allow me to do things that maybe it used to, and now I've got to walk down a slippery set of stairs and I don't have an option.

I mean, I feel like I don't have any, I don't have an option for lack of a better phrase.

Well, you're absolutely right. So let's dig a little bit deeper and say, okay, how are these fires actually, how are these fires occurring in the areas of egress? And once again, I'm repeating myself, but 43% were in a hallway, 26% were in the stairwell, and 18% were in the lobby.

That's 87%, that's 87% combined.

That's exactly right, that's exactly right. Out of the 2022 fires that occurred in egress area, so 66% of those were in cingulary. So in other words, somebody set those fires.

And what did they set those fires with? Well, clothing, wood, paper, products. So now they're starting to paint a picture.

What we see the habits that are occurring in Canada in the areas of egress is that garbage is discarded into the hallway, either clothing or et cetera. And then somebody is going, basically happening by and setting them on fire. So overall, adding that sprinkler, what I saw from our data is sprinklers don't actually, under these circumstances, don't actually function that frequently.

But what I can tell you is the smoke is phenomenally choked within all of the cavities within those buildings that I've analyzed in this database. So in other

words, now we're taking away a stairwell. We've got a hallway or a stairwell that's full of smoke.

And what the proponents are suggesting is we're going to pressurize them.

So now when this fire occurs, those areas are charged with smoke. People are going to hear the bells ringing, if the bells ring, because I'm going to say that 35% of the time that these fires occurred, the detection equipment failed, didn't work

And this is what we're dealing with today. So all of a sudden now we're going to be faced with this scenario where that second egress that seems to be functioning today, is not, this isn't well thought through, and those things are going to fail, and people are going to be stuck in their suites, they can't get out because there's no other place for them to go.

Len, before I let you go, I got one question for you, and I think, you know, I'm hearing loud and clear what you say. You're a retired fire chief, you've been through this, you've seen the good, the bad, the ugly of fires, and it can change in the matter of moments. But the reality is, these decisions usually take two to three years to process.

I mean, you've got to go through all of these different groups and people that give their stamp of approval to this. This one feels like it was really force-fed because obviously housing is at the top of the political spectrum. You've got an upcoming election.

Does this feel like this was force-fed and that everybody hasn't even really seen this or been able to digest the fact that we're making this move?

Well, you're absolutely right. Now, I was part of the government's consultation process, along with a lot of the other associations that I had mentioned. And there was two meetings, two meetings.

And then a report was done by a consultant. And next thing we see is the legislation or the, the order in council or however, the instrument that they used to create the code is now, is now basically put in front of us. And so I'm just really surprised that that would have occurred, especially under the circumstances where there's just absolutely nobody supports this.

Len, it's a really sobering conversation. And I'm glad that we had an opportunity to share and compare notes, but you know, you've been there, you've put on the helmet, you've put on the boots, you know what it looks like. So your opinion's really valued.

Thank you for your time, Len.

Thank you so much, take care.