

JAN 31 1981

# Push on for school sprinklers

by Tim Frystak,  
staff reporter

Trying to prevent school fires has been a hot issue with fire departments and fire protection districts ever since the 1958 Our Lady of the Angels School fire in Chicago that killed 95 students and teachers. While some fire codes have been changed in the state and other communities as a result of the blaze, measures involving fire suppression devices have remained unattended to until only recently.

In the wake of the decision to build a ninth school by Orland School District 135, officials with the Orland Fire Protection District began a campaign urging the school district to include sprinklers in the new Centennial School, 141st Street and Creek Crossing Drive. A 10th school is also slated for construction sometime in the future.

According to Chief Robert Buhs, he was able to show the board there's a way to save money and lives by installing a fire suppression system, and that the residents should be given a chance to vote on the matter. Buhs explained that installation costs for a sprinkler system is \$1.50 per square foot in a new building — nearly the same cost as installing carpeting.

While the National Fire Protection

Association and the Building Officials and Code Administration mandate the use of sprinklers as a major fire protection device in buildings, Buhs said schools are instead covered by the Life Safety Code, which requires sprinklers only in paint shops, incinerator rooms, stage areas and special hazardous areas.

However, schools and the safety of children are equally important, and while a concrete building may be considered "fireproof" by some, Buhs stressed that the addition of electrical wires, paper products and carpeting, among other things, can all be fire hazards.

"Nothing is fireproof. There's nothing I have seen (in more than 20 years as a fire fighter) that's fireproof," the chief said.

By including the sprinklers, Buhs said a blaze can be knocked out or at least knocked down during what he called a "panic stage."

"There's more to it than cost," he added. "You start putting carpeting down. And the minute you put paneling up, the minute you start putting contents in, you have a fire load."

Buhs' appeal and a resolution by the Orland Fire Protection District seems to have encouraged District 135 officials to tie the sprinkler question to a \$17 million

bond referendum in the April election.

According to Dr. Thomas Pauley, District 135 superintendent, the board voted Jan. 14 to apply \$2 million of the bond issue to installing sprinklers in the new schools and place them in the eight existing schools. Buhs explained that the cost per square foot is slightly higher to install fire suppression systems in existing schools, and while he didn't want to quote an exact price, said he was sure the price was "still reasonable."

Asked whether he thought it was a good idea to include sprinklers in District 135 schools, Pauley replied, "Of course."

Although the issue will be on the next ballot for the voters to choose, Buhs stressed the issue cannot be resolved only in Orland Park. The chief explained the issue may also be taken up by Sen. William Mahar (R-19) with the hope fire suppression systems will find a place in the agenda of the Illinois Legislature.

However, Mahar said sprinklers are not a new issue in the General Assembly. During its last session the matter passed the House but failed to make it out of the Senate Education Committee. Even so, Mahar said he expects the matter to once again be introduced by State Rep. Mary Lou Cowlshaw, and if it manages to make it to the Senate would receive his backing.

"I just don't think (\$1.50 per square foot) is a lot of money, and it's certainly money well spent," Mahar stated. He added that if the matter comes to the Senate he would like to see the state pick up part of the tab to help school districts pay for the cost. Because not many school districts in the area are constructing new school buildings, Mahar added he would like to see the state pay for half of the sprinkler cost. The issue must be introduced in the Legislature by April 12.

In Buhs' view, the issue of money and payment may be of a major concern to smaller or poorer school districts throughout Illinois. But the chief maintained, "We're not saying go back and give every school a sprinkler. We're saying give every new school a sprinkler or after a certain percentage of remodeling has been done put in a sprinkler."

He added, "It's statewide. It doesn't end here."

Now that residents in District 135 will have the chance to voice their opinion on the sprinkler issue, Buhs said whatever happens he and the district will be able to say with a clear conscience that they did their best to tell people of the possible hazards.

"Even if it fails, we have done our job," Buhs said.