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**Memorandum**

To: Town Council

From: Mike Vaughan, Fire Marshal

Date: April 19, 2016

Subject: Fire and Life Safety Inspections

## **I. Background**

Vail Fire and Emergency Services is committed to the concept that public safety is an essential component of maintaining our status as the premier international mountain resort community. When discussing the threat of fire in Vail, most think of the wildfire threat. While the wildfire threat is real, it is not hard to conceptualize how devastating a large fire in the core of either village could be to the Town of Vail and the guest experience.

Vail Fire and Emergency Services (VFES) has primary responsibility for fire prevention activities in the Town of Vail. The foundation of the fire prevention program is that a proactive approach, in which emergencies are averted, is preferable to a reactive approach which is focused solely on managing emergencies.

Historically, VFES had a robust fire prevention division which was staffed with four personnel until the late 1990's. These personnel were responsible for plan review, sprinkler and fire alarm inspections as well as conducting inspections of commercial and mixed use occupancies. Due to the efforts of the fire prevention staff, the Town has suffered relatively few significant fire losses. This is particularly notable due to the fact that much of the original village was built prior to modern fire codes and particularly fire sprinkler requirements. During this era, great strides were made in protecting the community from the threat of fire and in strengthening fire code requirements. Despite this success, it is acknowledged that the fire prevention program during this era was viewed as being rigid by some members of the public.

Over time, fire prevention staffing levels were decreased, which resulted in a reduction in the number and type of inspections that were conducted. Eventually inspections only occurred when associated with a building, fire alarm/sprinkler permit, or when a specific issue was identified through a complaint or during an incident. During the early 2000s it was identified that there was a need to conduct regular fire inspections. A fire inspection program that utilized fire engine crews was initiated but was not successfully implemented.

## **II. Current Situation**

Today the fire prevention staff of VFES consists of one person, the Fire Marshal. The Fire Marshal is responsible for fire investigation, plan review and inspecting the installation of fire sprinklers and alarm systems. The Fire Marshal is also a key participant in the Design Review Team and the Event Review Committee (ERC). Another significant commitment of time is inspection of special events to insure that proper access and exiting are maintained and that fire hazards are abated.

Due to this workload, the Fire Marshal is unable to conduct routine inspections of commercial occupancies such as; retail stores, restaurants, hotels and places of assembly. Currently, hazardous conditions are only identified when they are found during the course of an emergency call, when a complaint is received, or when an inspection is conducted subsequent to the modification of an existing fire protection system or the installation of a new fire protection system.

## **III. Planned Activities**

Best practices for fire prevention programs are based upon a three pronged strategy: education, engineering and enforcement. Education encompasses all activities that are conducted to help members of the public understand how to prevent fires and actions to take when a fire occurs. Education is also focused on insuring that building owners and occupants understand how to interface with the fire protection systems within a building. Engineering refers to systems in the built environment which lessens the impact of a fire or provides notification of a fire. Typically this consists of fire protection systems such as alarm systems, sprinkler systems, air handlings systems, and smoke/fire partitions. Enforcement is the third component of fire prevention. Enforcement is the strategy of last resort which is used to abate hazardous conditions when efforts to gain compliance through education have not been successful.

Staff has spent the past year developing a program to address the current deficiencies in the inspection program. This program will use fire engine personnel to conduct inspections. The primary focus of this program will be to take an approach that emphasizes education over enforcement. The engine crews have received training from the Fire Marshal on conducting inspections. Topics of this training included identifying hazards, an overview of common fire code violations, documentation and strategies to gain compliance through education.

The inspection program will also have the value-added benefit of allowing our firefighters to become familiar with the buildings in the community. This will provide for increased efficiency and firefighter safety when emergencies do occur. During the inspection, the crew will also update our records with information such as after- hours contact information.

The inspection program has been structured with the goal of inspecting each commercial occupancy every two years. Each month a list of occupancies due for inspection will be provided to each of the three shifts. The company officer responsible for the inspection will contact the business to schedule a time for the inspection and to advise the business owner of the purpose of the inspection as well as the types of hazards that the inspection will be focused on. The inspection will be conducted using a standardized checklist. Upon completion of the inspection, the business owner will be given a copy of the inspection report. In all circumstances, the focus will be on education and gaining voluntary compliance.

#### **IV. Action Requested of Council**

Request input from Council