

HABITAT

BUILDING OPERATIONS

Co-op/Condo Boards' Impossible Deadline: Comply with New Fire Law by June 2

By Frank Lovece

April 2, 2010 — Color us confused: A New York City regulation went into affect in March that mandates a new color-coding system for fire-suppression piping in every building in the city — residential, commercial, institutional, co-op, condo, existing, new construction, all of it — by June 2. This means new painting and certification all exposed standpipes and sprinkler piping, and all related valve handles.



Sound simple? Slap a new coat of paint here and there? Brother, you're living in a pipe dream. One expert says the city's deadline is impossible to meet — and what you don't know about the complicated law could lead to fines and, in one not improbable scenario, a loss-of-life lawsuit.

Local Law 58/09 mandates that all exposed standpipes and sprinkler piping must be painted red (with some exceptions we'll get into). It also mandates that

- “dedicated” standpipe valve handles be painted red
- dedicated sprinkler valve handles green, and
- combination standpipe valve handles yellow,

all followed by certification from an authorized inspector. There's no grandfathering, and no provision for getting an extension.

Not a Lead-Pipe Cinch

The first thing you need to know is that “standpipe” in this context does not mean that familiar type of two-headed plumbing fixture you see commonly along New York sidewalks, called **Siamese connections** and which used to pump water into a building during a fire. While these do fall into the

broad category known as “standpipes,” and are sometimes called “street standpipes,” what the new law is referring to are **internal standpipes** — rigid vertical piping inside a building, to which fire hoses can be connected. Essentially, internal standpipes are like indoor fire hydrants.

A dedicated internal standpipe or sprinkler is one that gets water from its own (“dedicated”) water main coming in from outside the building. A non-dedicated standpipe or sprinkler uses water from your regular domestic water system, and is limited to 30 sprinkler heads maximum throughout the building. A combination standpipe, as the name indicates, gets its water from a combination of those two sources.

“It’s a little confusing even to professionals in the beginning,” says Bob Bellini, president of the Master Plumbers Council trade group, a member of the New York City Plumbing Licensing Board, and the president of the plumbing, heating and HVAC company Varsity Home Service, based in Flushing, Queens.

What’s changing are the colors required for the inside piping and valve handles. (Click on image below to enlarge.) “The color code requirements for the painting of valve handles on [internal] firefighting systems will follow the Siamese color coding” already in effect, Bellini says.



Color Wheel of Confusion

So, OK. Red, green, yellow. What’s the big deal?

Plenty. For one thing, says Bellini, “The trick here is identifying what type of system you have” — dedicated standpipe, dedicated sprinkler or combination. “You need to survey the system for the proper identification and for the purpose of the valve handles. That’s the most important function of the professional,” such as a licensed master plumber, who does the survey. “The second most important is after the pipes are painted, and certifying that they’re painted

right.”

And not all sections within the system have to be painted. Painting a valve handle a particular color when it doesn’t need to be, for instance, can create confusion in an emergency as to just what that valve handle is for.

“You don’t have to paint the whole system,” Bellini says, “but just the applicable portions. There are a lot of exclusions,” such as the sprinkler head, which cannot be painted; the main water line from the street, called the feed main; and branch lines. “Not all valve handles have to be painted,” Bellini notes. “Hose valve handles don’t. And pressure control valve handles,” among others.

So, you have a professional come in and survey your fire-suppression piping and valve handles. Then you can just have your super or handypersons do the actual painting, right? Aside from any union considerations and job descriptions, that might not be the best idea.

“Can you have the staff paint the piping? Of course you can,” says Bellini. “But it’s very, very important that paintwork is done correctly. I’d highly recommend a professional painting company because of the degreasing that has to be done. Pipes are installed with oils and that oil drips down

the pipe, so preparation of the piping is very important. There's degreasing, there's cleaning dust and debris, if there's any rust on the pipe then the pipe has to be sanded and buffed, and then it has to be primed for paint."

Generally, you use a primer specifically designed for steel. But complicating matters on the painting side, Bellini says, is that "if any portions of the system are **galvanized steel** or [a standard type of plastic called] **CPVC**, then the preparation requirements are much more involved in order for the red paint to adhere."

Stamp Collecting

Another cause for concern is to paint carefully and to mask off sprinklers and — a little-known fact that trips up many co-op and condo boards and building managers — any factory markings on the pipes. First off, any splattered paint that dries on a sprinkler head is considered foreign matter and has to be removed, often making it simpler and less time-consuming to simply replace the sprinkler head rather than chipping at and stripping dry paint.



Even more importantly, however, cautions Bellini (at right), "is that any factory markings on the pipe" — which indicate things like material composition and pipe specifications — "have to be masked off before painting. They can't be painted over." These markings are generally ink-stamped on, and not stamped on as in indenting the metal.

The upside-down issue there, he notes, is that co-op and condo boards "who have done a good job of keeping their building maintained through the years will have more troubles than those who've just left the pipes unpainted. In my experience, I've never seen a case where the factory marking were masked off. So if you've painted over the pipe markings, you may have to strip the paint first and paint it again."

Bellini says, the factory markings should be OK if you strip the paint. "My understanding is they cannot be removed with standard stripping solvent." But if they do disappear, he wonders, "Would you have to replace the pipe? I don't know." In the unlikely event this becomes an issue, check with your co-op or condo board's attorney.

Worst-Case Scenario

Another unlikely event — but one you should acknowledge and consider — makes it preferable to use an outside company rather than in-house staff to do the painting. "God forbid there's an injury or a loss and [your staff] mispainted," Bellini says. With an outside professional, the liability lies with them. But if your staff made the mistake, then it's the co-op or condo's responsibility.

The final step after all this is certification that the job was done to the city's requirements. Certification must be done by one of four types of professionals you hire to do it:

- Licensed master plumbers
- Licensed master fire suppression piping contractors
- Registered design professionals, such as an architect or an engineer
- People with the appropriate Fire Department Certificate of Fitness

The caution against mispainting is the same for miscertifying. One of your staff may have an Fire Department City of New York (FDNY) certificate, which allows him or her to certify for your building only, but for reasons given above, it might be better to have an outside professional do it.

Can all this really be done by June 2 in every building in New York City? “There are not enough contractors” available in order for this be done, Bellini maintains. Given that, “I find it hard to believe that if people are not in compliance by June 2 that they city is going start issuing mass violations. There aren’t enough inspectors for that. I believe what’s going to happen is when you get your regularly scheduled FDNY inspection, that that is when violations and fines will come.”

Ultimately, uniform coding will almost certainly help save lives and reduce fire damage. But as Bellini notes, “One law with good intentions opens up a tremendous amount of questions that have to be answered” — which, hopefully, we did here.