



Changing times weed out boom opportunists (or, Closing the gates on trunk slammers)

The recent leveling off of Calgary's economic boom could mean a weeding out of opportunists in the fire inspection field targeting the uneducated resident, according to one local expert.

"There are a lot of people out there who are doing inspections but they're not doing them as per ULC (Underwriter's Laboratories of Canada) requirements," said Byron Witherspoon, Alberta operations manager with Vipond Inc, said during a recent interview at the company's Calgary office. "CAN/ULC-S536-04 is the code put out by the ULC stating how a test should be performed and what's supposed to be done during that test, as well as the paperwork you should be filing."

Witherspoon stressed that the most important thing a condominium complex's board of directors can do to protect themselves and the residents they represent against backlash from an improperly performed fire safety inspection is to educate themselves about the requirements for such an inspection.

"You'll find that some of the fly-by-nights, or trunk slammers, as we like to call them, will give out a one-sheet inspection and say everything tested ok. They'll put their business card in the panel and say they're done."

Without the proper knowledge, directors and residents will not know the inspection was improper until a fire safety event happens and the insurance agent refuses a full payout, or outright denies coverage, because the inspection was not up to expectations.

"Education is the big thing," stressed Witherspoon. "We can offer to give directors copies of what a real report should look like. If the company they've hired didn't give them a similar type of report then they're not getting the bang for their buck."

Asking to see the inspector's Canadian Fire Alarm Association credentials or the Provincial "P" ticket is another method of protecting the building against improper inspections.

"There are several different types of accreditation they can have but they should have some sort of paper work saying that they are trained."

Because condominium complexes involve multiple residents, Witherspoon explained, the fire inspection should involve a representative amount of time. "We find a lot of times that we'll go into a building for a first time and go, 'But, you have 300 suites. How can you possibly expect a one-sheet report?'"

In such situations, Witherspoon said his staff end up in a position of educating property managers and directors about the importance of entering each suite to physically inspect the alarm inside. "They say that they've never had to go into suites before. Well, people just don't think. They've obviously just wanted to get the job done, sign off on it, and get on the way to the next inspection."

Witherspoon, who returned to Calgary two years ago and to Vipond after spending 12 years in Kelowna, six of which was with the Vipond branch office there, is confident that the leveling off of the recent Alberta economic boom will act as a natural pesticide, weeding the trunk slammers out of the fire inspection industry.

"I think we (as and industry) gave them the opportunity because of the fact that it was so busy," he said. "Our biggest problem wasn't doing the job properly it was that we didn't have the personnel to do all the jobs."

When clients became impatient they looked elsewhere, often taking whomever was available. "But, I think things are going to self-correct over the next year or two," he said. In the meantime, management at Vipond is focusing on recession-proofing the business through diversity.

“Vipond as a company has been around since 1945,” Witherspoon said. “Just about everything a condominium complex would use for life safety equipment is what we’re involved with. We want to be the centre for anything to do with protection or safety.”

Vipond Inc., through its parent company APi Group, is one of the leading international fire-protection, design, construction, and servicing companies specializing in system design, supplying complete detection and suppression systems.

With offices in the United Kingdom and the United States, as well as across Canada, Vipond has access to a large pool of equipment in research and development.

“Right now we are seeing a drop in requests for new construction fire alarm systems but we’re seeing a rise in card-access and security systems as everybody’s starting to protect what they have.”

Annual inspections and service will, however, remain strong parts of the company’s portfolio, said Witherspoon. “You find that because of the types of systems that go into residential condominiums you’ll have more smoke detection, more heat detectors, a lot more sprinklers.”

The sheer numbers of the devices in condominium complexes increase the incidents of service calls.

“People will leave their tap on or there’s overflow, and the next thing you know water goes all over the floor, then it’s seeping down the conduits. Water always seems to end up in the fire alarm system. And, I don’t know how it is but it’s Murphy’s Law that it never gets there until about two or three in the morning.”

Byron Witherspoon, Alberta operations manager with **Vipond Inc.** has over 26 years experience in the fire safety industry. He brings his expertise to the Calgary office.

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