

ARTICLES OF INTEREST

Wood Framing Costs Go Up As Security is Ordered on Unfinished Wood Frame Buildings

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Brian Gerritz, the president of Pavilion Construction, recalls standing last August across from the still-burning remains of the unfinished Monroe Apartments. He didn't yet know the five-alarm fire — one of the most memorable in Portland last year, though no one was hurt — was arson. He turned to Herbert McKillop, one of the project's owners: "This doesn't happen," Gerritz said, "but it just happened to us."

Portland fire officials, however, see plenty of reason to worry about a repeat. Wood-framed buildings are rising across much of the Portland region because of an apartment construction boom.

So as the team behind the Monroe starts to ramp up construction again on the corner of Northeast Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard and Northeast Monroe Street, they'll be doing so with round-the-clock security to prevent nighttime prowlers. The fire bureau has begun imposing similar requirements on wood-frame construction projects across the city as they enter their most vulnerable phase of construction.

"These building have no protections. It's just bare wood, and it's stacked up like kindling," said Doug Jones, Portland's assistant fire marshal. Once they catch fire, he said, they burn too quickly to save. "So we want to prevent anything from happening to begin with."

The Monroe clearly shows the risk.

The first 911 call came around 4:14 a.m. on Aug. 8, with one neighbor reporting flames that were twice as high as the building itself. Within 20 minutes, the framing had collapsed. It took 135 firefighters and 1.5 million gallons of water to extinguish the fire, but not before it spread to a nearby house that was left uninhabitable.

The apartment building, about half finished, was at its most vulnerable. Workers were erecting the wood studs that form the structure's skeleton.

Eventually, to meet the fire code, framing wood will be covered with fire-resistant drywall or other material that's made to withstand fire for an hour before it collapses. Apartment buildings like the Monroe will also be fitted with sprinkler systems before they're occupied.

The risk of fire during construction isn't news to the fire bureau. In 1999, another fire swept through the under construction Kearney Plaza Apartments in the Pearl District. Authorities suspected arson there, too, but didn't change any rules in response to the fire.

Now the bureau is requiring most builders to post guards at wood-frame construction sites during those critical times. That means added cost, and there's some ambivalence among builders and developers over whether additional security is really needed. Gerritz said the added security cost for Pavilion on the Monroe project will be an additional \$6,000 to \$10,000 a month. But after the experience with the Monroe, he called it "a cost of doing business." Norm

Dowty, a principal at R&H Construction, said security recently added \$20,000 to an \$8 million project. "Our clients, they don't like to have to pay for guard service," Dowty said. A fire is "something that happens rarely ... but ultimately worker safety and public safety is No. 1." He added that his company sometimes hires guards anyway at sites where security breaches like trespassing or theft have already caused problems.

The fire bureau has authority to require even previously permitted projects to increase their security, Jones said, but it's trying to be flexible given the additional cost on developers. For example, some close-together projects might be allowed to share security. Others might be allowed to use security cameras that can be monitored remotely. Builders could also shuffle their schedule to apply drywall or sprinkler systems sooner.

At the Monroe, workers are preparing to start again on the 46-unit apartment building. In this case, given last August's fire, plus another fire at the now-vacant house next door, Pavilion will have off-hours guards throughout the construction.

"We were kind of upset it's taken this long. We were ready to get it right back up." Gerritz said. "And we're going to continue to build. We're going to put of a lot of wood in this city."