



# off-campus

By Tim Knisely

## Sprinklers and Greek Housing:

### Part 1 of a 2 Part Series:

**O**n the evening of February 20, 2003 a fire raced through the Station Night Club in West Warwick, Rhode Island killing 100 people. This was the fourth-deadliest nightclub fire in U.S. history. In State College, Pennsylvania, like many other cities across the U.S., officials were concerned that a tragedy such as this could occur in their own city. In fact, the State College Borough Council instructed the regional code enforcement entity, the Centre Region Code Administration (CRCA), to immediately review the nightclubs located downtown to see if the clubs were safe. These nightclubs are popular to the students at the Pennsylvania State University as well as to the local residents.

After reviewing the nightclubs in State College, the fire inspection division of the CRCA reported that the clubs were relatively safe - knowing that a majority were sprinklered. Further supporting this statement was that the CRCA conducts regular fire inspections of the properties to determine code compliance as well as occupancy inspections during late night hours to make sure the clubs are not overcrowded.

One occupancy type in State College that is not regulated like a nightclub, but operates as one, is the fraternity house. These houses have been on the radar of the fire inspectors for years and have had a high frequency of large-loss fires. These houses were the largest fire risk in the community; when you add a large occupant load, careless smoking and the alcohol factor in the late night hours during the party or the early morning hours after a party - you find a disaster waiting to happen.



### The Greek System:

The Greek system at the University Park campus of the Pennsylvania State University is one of the largest in the nation. Along with this large system brings 47 fraternity houses, all located off-campus. Most of the houses are very large three-and-four-story structures built in the early 1900s. The average size of the fraternity house is 12,000 square feet with the largest being 25,000 square feet. Some houses permit up to 60 residents with the average being approximately 40.

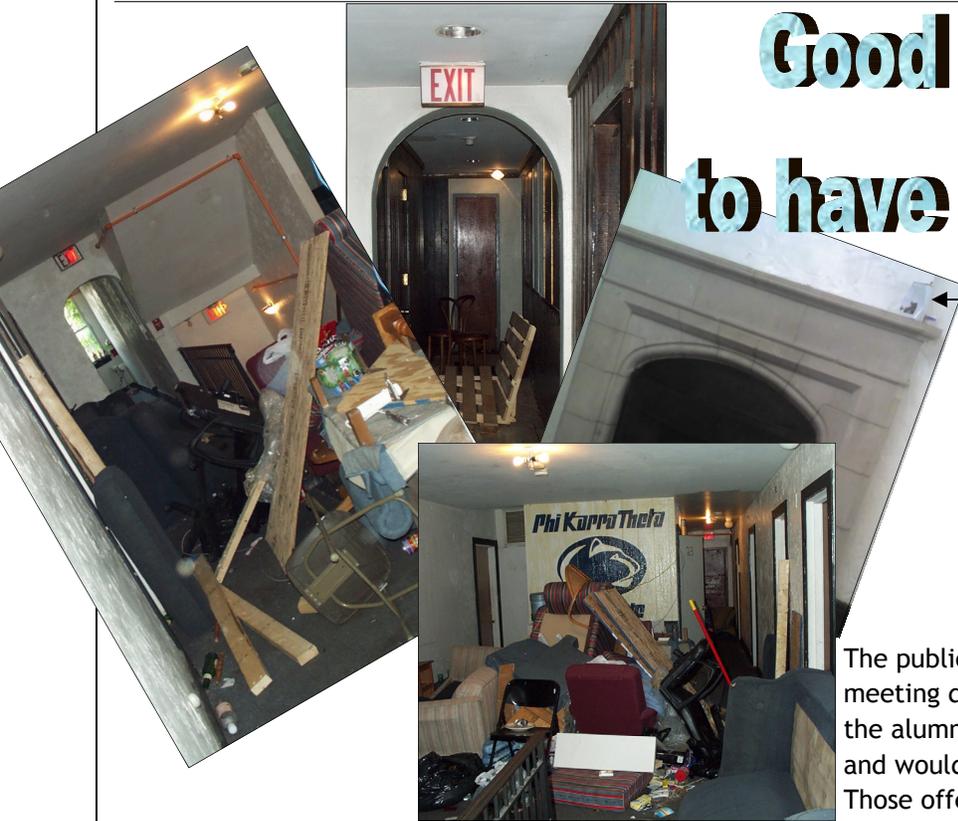
Many fires across the nation have made us aware of the hazards these houses represent and brought fraternity fire safety to the forefront. One of the best ways to provide protection in a fraternity house and reduce the risk from fire is to install sprinklers. Fires that occurred in Bloomsburg, PA in October 1994 and again in March of 2000 as well as in Chapel Hill, NC in May 1996 killed a total of 13 students. In 2003, only ten houses in State College had systems installed.

### Ordinance Development:

In April 2003, an ordinance was proposed to the State College Borough Council that would require every fraternity house to be retrofitted with an approved sprinkler system. The presentation in support of the proposal included fire data from State College and beyond and photos of hazards discovered during inspections. Included with the proposal was video footage from a press

# Good Reasons to have Sprinklers!

Lighter Fluid on the Fireplace!!



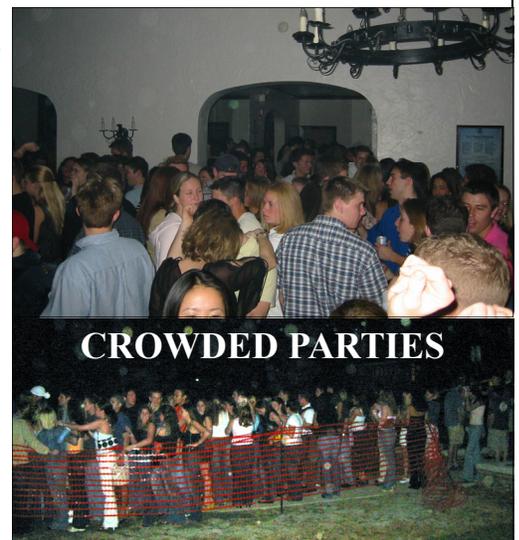
conference in Columbus, Ohio near the Ohio State University where a fire killed five students just 30 hours before the meeting. Council was told that the single largest fire risk in State College could be greatly reduced with sprinklers, and was asked to take this action before a fire claims a life or lives in State College. Council was also told of efforts by the fire department in Chapel Hill, North Carolina to require sprinklers in the fraternity and sorority houses that were rejected by their city council. After a fraternity fire killed five students on Mother's Day in 1996, the City of Chapel Hill swiftly took action to require sprinklers.

In State College, staff had recommended that the houses be given between three and seven years to complete the installation. The council moved the proposed ordinance to a public hearing and a vote later in the summer.

From April - July 2003 the CRCA staff had several meetings with property owners and contractors to gather accurate price information. Staff also met with the manufacturers and the National Fire Sprinkler Association's staff and board members to gather information about the latest advances in technology and for guidance in getting the ordinance approved. During this time no one had publicly disagreed with the ordinance, but several people involved with the fraternities told staff that ordinance would put them out of business.

The public hearing was held on July 11, 2003. The meeting date was strategically chosen because many of the alumni boards held meetings during this weekend and would provide the boards an opportunity to attend. Those offering testimony at the hearing included the State Fire Commissioner's Office and the National Fire Sprinkler Association. Again, no one publicly spoke out against the ordinance. At the conclusion of the hearing the borough council unanimously passed the ordinance and established the compliance date of September 1, 2008.

As of September 1, 2008 all fraternity houses in State College are protected by a sprinkler system. Part 2 will outline the lessons learned over the past five years.



**CROWDED PARTIES**

*Tim Knisely is the Senior Fire Inspector for the Centre Region Code Administration in State College, PA. He is also on the Board of Directors and Treasurer for the Center for Campus Fire Safety. Write about your off-campus housing experiences. Send your article to Tim Knisely.*

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