

20 Fair Assumptions about Garden Apartment Fires

by charles bailey for tinhelmet

[That men do not learn very much from the lessons of history is the most important of all the lessons that History has to teach"](#)

Aldous Huxley

The book on garden apartment fires was written before my time. My predecessors both in the career and volunteer ranks fought this relatively new fire problem head on throughout the 80's. It is no longer a new problem. As they tell the story, countless roofs were burned off of buildings before it became clear that there was a better way to fight garden apartment fires than chasing it all over the building. It is imperative that we learn their lessons, lessons now proven over and over again for over 20 years.

What their history and experience shows is that you can make a certain series of assumptions about fires in garden apartments. If you make those assumptions and plan for them you will do a much better job of putting the fires out in a timely fashion. My discussion is basically a set of 20 assumptions you can make about garden apartment fires.

Before we get started I have to explain what a garden apartment is to me. When I use the term I am referring to any number of different styles of buildings where each apartment entry door opens to a common landing served by a common stair. The common stair may or may not be exposed to the outside. There are typically four individual units on each floor. The buildings are typically on a slope so that the front is of fewer stories than the rear. Another characteristic is that the buildings are set back from the roadway/parking lot. Parking lots tend to be crowded in the evening and at night making apparatus positioning crucial. There is no room for error placing apparatus. Access to the rear of buildings may be impossible with apparatus and difficult on foot, especially in bad weather. Buildings are typically connected in clusters, many times with a common overhead void space. Building construction varies but typically these units are of ordinary construction.

** Some people will assume that I am talking about "their" fire or a particular fire, no such luck. Truth is we have all made the same mistakes on garden apartment fires so when you talk about a failure at one it sounds like the same failure at all the other ones.*

1. If you see a plumbing truck/van in front of the building where you are sent to investigate an odor of smoke you can assume the building is on fire. ;-)
2. If you find fire in the terrace level apartment you can assume it there is already fire in the attic.

3. In the typical garden apartment there are usually 4 apartments per floor, with 2-4 floors that is 12 –16 apartments, you can assume someone is home.

4. If the building is on fire you can assume there will be people out screaming on the balconies, what you cannot assume is that they are all in need of rescue.

5. You can assume that the incident priorities remained unchanged: life safety, incident stabilization, and property conservation. Place the first line in support of these objectives. (This means you have to secure the interior stairs and protect the search.)

6. You can assume that you will need:
One line for the original fire apartment
One line for the back up line
One line for the floor above
One line for the attic/cockloft

7. Assuming #6 you can assume that a standard 4 engine, 2 truck, one rescue, first alarm assignment will not be enough. You will need to commit four hand lines quickly and you have only four engine companies. (I prefer to call for help in alarm-sized packages)

8. You can assume that every single one of those for hand lines discussed in #6 will be going through the front door, you can also assume that someone will be screaming the muffled screams of a tired firefighter in SCBA screaming for someone to, “feed me some line.” Then you will hear the second scream, “which one.”

9. You can assume that once #8 happens progress will be slow. *(The moral of this story is to not stretch more than two lines through the same opening.)*

10. You can assume that someone on the first alarm will have to stretch a long line. This means that companies should really train hard on deploying the long lines, and figuring ways other than the front door to get it in place.

11. You can assume that the front does not look like the back. Ensure that companies due to the rear are giving a size-up including the number of floors in the rear.

12. You can assume that if you “lose” the interior stairwell your ability to preserve life has been severely compromised.

13. You can assume that unless the building is fully involved, and I mean the entire thing is on fire, that a 2 ½” or 2” line is going to be too big to move around. The guys with the smaller lines may take a second or two longer but they will still put the fire out.

14. You can assume that you will only get one shot at proper apparatus placement. Don’t get caught up in the drama, take the extra few seconds to get a good spot. You only get one shot at it.

15. You can assume that unexposed fire in the voids will cost more than the damaged drywall in apt. 402. (Open the joint up and fast). You can also assume that the fire is in the voids.

16. You can assume that the fire will travel to the exposure buildings through the attic/cockloft space.

17. You can assume that someone will declare the “search complete”, but not say that they only checked one apartment. It is damn near impossible for one crew of three or four to do a good search of 12-16 apartments in a reasonable amount of time. If you need help searching, ask for it.

18. You can assume that if the fans are started before the voids are opened and cleared you will need one alarm in addition to what you have on the scene.

19. You can assume that the trench cut will take more time, more people and more saws than you thought, and in my book much longer than pulling the ceilings on the top floor. I ain't saying don't use trench cuts, but I usually don't.

20. You can sometimes assume that you will have water supply issues in these complexes, especially those on private loops. Take the time to pre-plan, do some flow tests, develop some station and battalion level plans in concert with the SOPs, and put the fire out.

Comments welcome

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