

Progressive Building Management Co.

Opts to Bring Luxury Chicago High-Rise Fire Protection Up-to-Date

by Northern Illinois Real Estate Magazine staff writer

When RMK Management Corporation purchased the McClurg Court Center twin towers approximately three years ago, the new owners were eager to update the buildings, which had been put into service in the early 1970s. Maximizing a coveted location right off the Magnificent Mile, RMK started an ongoing capital improvement project immediately, including renovations to the luxury apartments.

Then in 2008, the owners began a six-month project to modernize the building's life safety systems for approximately 1,080 residential units as well as common areas and commercial space.

The City of Chicago ordinance instituted in 2004 requires pre-1975 commercial structures exceeding 80 feet in height to have at least one-third of their gross square footage retrofit with fire sprinklers by January 1, 2009, and fully sprinklered by 2017. The ordinance also requires all residential high-rises to submit a Life Safety Evaluation, which may result in a sprinkler system retrofit. The owners of McClurg Court Center voluntarily chose to retrofit their building with a fire sprinkler system for the safety of the property and its residents.

According to the National Fire Protection Association, 82 percent of fire deaths occur in residential occupancies nationwide, including high-rise buildings. Retrofitting the building will protect the residents who live in the building, other occupants in the common areas and commercial space, and firefighters who must respond if there is a fire. Adding the fire sprinkler system can also reduce insurance costs for the building owner and tenants.

The project wasn't without its challenges. The building was 98 percent occupied during the sprinkler retrofit. The property management company, M & R Development, scheduled work to keep inconvenience at a minimum and ensure that no residents were disrupted for more than a few hours at a time.

More than 10,000 sprinklers were installed and soffits were built to conceal the piping and integrate the system throughout the high-end units.

U.S. Fire Protection was the fire sprinkler contractor hired to retrofit the building. According to Mike Peterson, Vice President, U.S. Fire Protection, the complex nature of the project necessitated pre-planning and scheduling that was critical to the overall success of the project in the end.

"This was a progressive move, plain and simple," said Tom Lia, Executive Director, Northern Illinois Fire Sprinkler Advisory Board (NIFSAB). "The owners retrofit the towers with a fire sprinkler system, which not only achieved their goal of providing maximum protection for residents; it also enhanced the value of the real estate."

