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Request for follow-up information regarding the fire in the Forest Drive Building on Monday February 19, 2007

Submitted by Kathleen Comerford

3/7/2007

Discussion:

At approximately 3:30 p.m. on Monday, February 19, 2007, a student discovered a fire in the ceiling space above the men's bathroom in the History Department side of the Forest Drive Building. No one was injured, but this incident raises significant questions, among which are:

- 1) Was a Fire Marshal inspection of the Forest Drive Building carried out in 2006, and if so, why is the record unavailable? There are many such reports linked to the Environmental Safety web page, but a number of buildings, including Forest Drive, do not have any available. Will such an inspection be carried out in 2007? If so, what will happen if they find further problems with the building?
- 2) When will fire drills resume in the Forest Drive building? An informal poll of several of the faculty members in the building have no recollection of fire drills in quite some time/years.

Rationale:

A fire in the Forest Drive building could affect the safety and welfare of all university students, as well as a large number of faculty and staff. Several core survey courses are offered in the Forest Drive building, including English 1101, English 1102, History 1112, and History 2110 as well as a large number of classes in Africana Studies, International Studies, and Modern Languages. In addition, timing is of great importance: had the fire occurred at night, instead of during the day, the building could have been

seriously damaged, and instruction would have been impaired. Had no one witnessed it, the same could have resulted. The staff, faculty and students who use the building are justly concerned for their safety.

SEC Response:

I spoke with both Dr. Francois Song (Safety Engineering Manager) and Bob Seel of the Occupational Health/Safety Office (x7161) about this.

The State of Georgia (Safety Fire Division from John Oxendine's office) is responsible for fire inspections. They are behind in inspections due to staffing problems. The last inspection of Forest Drive by the State office was June 12, 2005. In that inspection 2 problems were noted: improper placement of some recycle bins, and a sprinkler escutcheon loose by the vending machines. The report (of which I have a copy) indicates that a followup inspection "is scheduled to be conducted in approximately 60 days." The follow-up has never occurred.

That inspection report (according to Dr. Song) has been removed from the Environmental Safety web site because it is out-of-date.

Both Dr. Song and Mr Seel indicated that they are working with the Fire Marshall's office to get "back up to speed" with inspections. They also noted that numerous checks on GSU facilities are made by GSU personnel each year, fire extinguishers are checked monthly, and physical plant employees are supposed to note and report any problems they notice as they perform normal duties. They will welcome input and would be happy to talk with any concerned individuals. (Note phone number for Bob Seel above.)

On fire drills: Dr. Song noted that these are carried out regularly in dorms and administrative facilities but have not been done in academic buildings for many years because of faculty resistance to disruption of classes. He indicated he would be more than happy to resume drills if there was faculty support.

Pat Humphrey, Faculty Senate Moderator

Senate Response:

Minutes 3/28/2007: The SEC received a request again from Kathleen Comerford about a follow-up after the fire in the Forest Drive Building on Monday, February 19th. She wanted to know when the last inspection was and why it was not online. Humphrey answered that she had talked to both Dr. Song and Mr. Seel from the Occupational Health and Safety Office about it. It's the responsibility of the state, not Georgia Southern, to get buildings inspected for fire safety, and the state as per usual is behind because of staffing problems.

The last full inspection was done on June 12, 2005, and at that time inspectors noted two problems. One was improper placement of some recycle bins, and one was a loose sprinkler escutcheon. The report also indicated that there was a followup inspection scheduled for 60 days later, which never happened. The last inspection report according to Dr. Song was removed from the Environmental Safety website because it was out-of-date, older than a year old. They are working with the state office to get back up to speed with inspections as required, and would be happy to talk with any faculty member or anyone having any questions or concerns about fire safety and environmental safety.

On a related issue, Dr. Comerford asked about fire drills in the building. Dr. Song noted that he would love to have fire drills in academic buildings, but that it was at the request of the faculty years ago that those were suspended because faculty didn't want to have their classes interrupted. They are carried out regularly, however, in administrative buildings and the dorms.

Marc Cyr (CLASS) asked about the fire in the Forest Drive Building. He wondered if the Forest Drive Building has "gone beyond its freshness day" and if it is past the date when we should be using it.

Patricia Humphrey (COST) Senate Moderator referred the question to Joe Franklin. Joe Franklin (Business and Finance) responded that, from what he could recall of the fire, it was not in the wiring of the building. It was a vent fan that had a problem. The wiring of the building itself is something that will be good for many, many years to come. It's done to a high standard. Things attached to that may or may not be. For example, a vent fan or a portable heater you might have in your office may not be up to a standard that the building wiring would be. He stated that, "We would be glad to look at that building for safety purposes, and it is looked at for safety purposes. The wiring, of course, is inside

of a sleeve and you can't tell when it's going bad necessarily. But we'd be glad to have our Environmental Safety and our Physical Plant people to look at that building for safety reasons in general, and try to correct any deficiencies that are there, or [determine] if the building was indeed in fact not safe."

Other Response:

3/30/2007 Below, I have posted an analysis of the electrical system of the Forest Drive Classroom Building by Charles Wray of Physical Plant. The short version is that we feel the electrical system and other life safety systems in the Forest Drive Classroom Building are in good shape. Additionally, I have requested an analysis of the roof problems and will report this as soon as possible. Joe Franklin Mr. Franklin, I am writing regarding the concerns expressed in the Faculty Senate about electrical system safety at the Forest Drive Classroom Building. Apparently the concerns were expressed following an incident where a bathroom exhaust fan overheated to the point where its plastic cover melted and burned up. A person walked in the bathroom and saw the smoke and pulled the fire alarm.

Smoke detectors in the hallway also activated after the bathroom door was opened and allowed smoke to escape. The building was evacuated. The fire dept responded and the smoke was cleared. Nothing except the plastic fan housing faceplate and fan blade actually burned. The ceiling mounted fan housing was metal. Most of the damage was from the smoke produced. The safety systems all worked properly. This event was very out of the ordinary for an exhaust fan. Normally, the failure of a fan motor or even a wiring short will either cause the circuit breaker to trip before enough heat is developed to cause a fire, or the fan will just quit working completely. In this case, the breaker was found tripped, however we do not feel that motor or wiring failure was the cause of the fire. We believe that the plastic fan blade probably slipped on the motor shaft allowing it to contact the plastic face plate. The heat produced by friction then caused the plastic to catch fire and the heat from the fire caused the wiring to short or the motor winding to short which tripped the breaker. In other words, we do not believe this fire was electrical in nature. The bathroom fans in this building are relatively light duty fans and are switched through the lighting circuit. They see a lot of run time. Over the years, several of the others have failed and been replaced without incident, as usually happens. This particular fan was one that was original to the building. We have checked the others and this one will be replaced shortly. The building itself is protected by a fire alarm system and is also fully protected by a fire sprinkler system. The fire in the bathroom was not near hot enough to activate a sprinkler head. The electrical system, does have type NM

cable for all branch circuit wiring (like most residential electrical systems). However, the service entrance equipment, panel feeders, and all wiring devices (switches and receptacles) are all of good commercial quality. The branch circuit breakers are all Square D Type QO which are very good quality. The other most important factor about this electrical system is that in all the years that it has been in operation, we have had little or no problems with wiring or terminations. The only problems we have had in this facility and it's sister building, Family and Consumer Science, are from circuits occasionally being overloaded by users and breakers tripping (too many things plugged in). I am not at all concerned about the electrical system in this building or the proper functioning of the breakers when needed.