

STATE FIRE PREVENTION COMMISSION
MINUTES
June 17, 2025
NO QUORUM
NO OFFICIAL BUSINESS CONDUCTED

Members Present: Edward S. Tochterman, Chairman
Caroll Spriggs, Vice Chairman
Eric Smothers
Randy Sanger

Members Absent: Mark Hopkins
Jerred Johnson
Ephraim Siff
Daniel Stevens

Vacancy: Washington-Metro Area/Industry

The Fire Prevention Commission held a public meeting June 17, 2025, at the Roland E. Powell Convention Center in Ocean City, Worcester County.

The Chairman called the meeting to order at 11:00 a.m.

The pledge of allegiance was recited.

FIRE MARSHAL REPORT

A copy of Acting State Fire Marshal (A/SFM) Jason Mowbray's written report was distributed.

A/SFM Mowbray introduced staff members of the Office of the State Fire Marshal (OSFM) who were present:

Deputy Chief Fire Marshal John Nelson, Southern Regional Commander
Deputy Chief Fire Marshal Derek Chapman, Commander Personnel Services Section
Chief Fire Protection Engineer Kenneth Bush

There are 73 confirmed fire fatalities in 2024—58 involving residential structures, 10 associated with vehicle fires, and five in other settings. Four jurisdictions consistently have the majority of the fatalities—Baltimore City and Prince George's, Baltimore, and Montgomery Counties. These jurisdictions also have the most dense populations. So far in 2025, there have been 33 confirmed fire fatalities—24 residential, three vehicles, and six in other settings. Four causes of death are pending the Medical Examiner's determination. Significantly there have been eight double-fatality fires in 2025. A copy of the 2024 Fire Fatality report was distributed. The report has added more county information, photos, and other things to make it more beneficial. He thanked Deputy Chief Walters, Administration Specialist Jessica Budd, Administrative Specialist Penny Doty, and Public Information Officer Oliver Alkire for contributing to the publication.

To date for 2025, the agency has conducted 432 investigations for fires, explosives, or other incidents; nearly 3,000 inspections; nearly 600 plan reviews; and 52 public education events.

Although the 2025 legislative session has ended, work groups for lithium-ion battery safety and pre-1974 non-sprinklered high-rise buildings continues. The three subgroups for the high-rise work group have submitted their final drafts and OSFM staff along with Maryland State Police (MSP) Government Affairs Unit are compiling one final report. A final draft has not yet been made available but it is on schedule to be released at the end of June.

A/SFM Mowbray reviewed some noteworthy incidents:

- In April two males, ages 62 and 70, died in a house fire in Faulkner. Severe hoarding conditions hindered firefighting operations. Although present, it is unknown if the smoke alarms functioned. A first-floor tenant escaped unharmed. Also in April, a fatality victim was found by firefighters during suppression activities of a mobile home fire. It is unknown if smoke alarms were present.
- In May there was significant and sudden flooding in the George's Creek area in Allegany County. One Deputy Fire Marshal assisted with evacuating children from a school.
- In June deputies in the Western Region arrested a Hagerstown man who started a fire endangering over a dozen city residents. The OSFM continues to work with and support the City Fire Marshal's Office.

The OSFM continues to partner with the Maryland State Firefighters Association (MSFA) for two paid internship positions for community risk reduction and fire protection engineering. The process to fill vacancies is ongoing but can be time-consuming. There is a civilian contractual position for a public information request officer who will be responsible for reviewing and fulfilling all the requests, reviewing body-worn camera footage, and redacting reports. A second round of interviews will occur in the near future. The first applicant pool unfortunately did not work out and the position had to be re-advertised. There is also a vacancy for an information technology support merit position. This position will support the new upcoming record management system program. There are multiple contractual fire safety inspector positions throughout the State some of which have been vacant for too long. One of the challenges is that these are contractual positions without benefits and applicants are screened through background checks and polygraph tests. There are two sworn deputy positions to be filled. One will be filled next week by a lateral transfer with the applicant already being police certified with fire investigation and inspection experience. She will be assigned to the Western Region. An applicant for the other position is in the final processing stage. Another deputy position is anticipated with the retirement of deputy who has been out on military leave serving in the U.S. Army and Department of Defense.

A community risk reduction weekend was held in May and one is scheduled for October. Regional offices partner with the local fire service to contact citizens to discuss fire prevention and safety, and to install smoke alarms. 200 smoke alarms have already been installed through this program. A new door hanger with a QR code is being left when no one is home so the occupants can contact the OSFM. It has received positive feedback.

In May A/SFM Mowbray directed the media and social media teams to work on a public advisory regarding the "Chromebook Challenge". School-age children were inserting paperclips or other metal artifacts into the charging ports of the Chromebooks in school, causing a runaway thermal reaction of the battery and subsequent fires. Information has been sent out through MCAC and to the Maryland School Safety Commission so hopefully future incidents can be avoided.

There is no update on switching from MFIRS to NERIS although work continues with various meetings and preparation for regional forums. The MSFA Convention's keynote speaker was the NERIS national director and positive feedback on the transition is starting to occur. All fire departments will get a new NERIS number and can use various software options to submit the data as long as it is NERIS compatible. Some concern was expressed about departments who are delinquent in submitting reports but A/SFM Mowbray remains optimistic that working with the Maryland Department of Emergency Management on the Senator Amos fund disbursements that counties are becoming aware that one delinquent fire company can result in the county not receiving its appropriation.

Northeast Regional staff conducted fire safety inspections at the Pimlico Race Course prior to the Preakness. They were also present to support the weekend event in May. This was the first time the responsibility for Pimlico and the Preakness transferred from Baltimore City to the State of Maryland.

Maryland now owns the facility. Redevelopment of the site and new construction will be occurring in years to come.

Last month pre-build meetings were held with software vendor DBSysgraph to discuss the development of a new document and record management system (RMS) for the agency. Both Fire Marshal Barnard and Fire Marshal Geraci had advocated for an electronic report system during their tenures and it has been nearly 20 years in the making. The Board of Public Works with the support of Colonel Butler approved \$1.4 million for the new software system. The system is broken down into subject groups—licenses, inspections, fees, and plan reviews. The system will allow the agency to make all aspects of activities associated with these groups to be electronic. It is planned to expand the system into investigations, fire incident reporting, and potentially training, testing, and tracking community risk reduction activities. Several states including Louisiana, South Carolina, and Vermont are using it and it can be modified for Maryland's specific needs. Hopefully it will be implemented in the first half of 2026 and eventually some aspects will be integrated with other delegated agencies with assistant and special assistant fire marshals.

Earlier this year the Washington County Commissioners declared their intent to assume responsibility to do fire code enforcement in Washington County. The current building and permits director retired from a building department in South Carolina where fire safety inspections and code enforcement were handled by the building department. The OSFM has been working with the county on the transition. They intend to assume plan review and fire code enforcement responsibility July 1, 2025. As in other jurisdictions who have fire code enforcement authority, the OSFM will reserve certain things such as State-owned properties, schools, explosives, and fireworks. The OSFM will continue to conduct investigations and handle bomb squad duties in the county.

The Western Regional Commander has been busy recently meeting with the Hagerstown City Fire Department who has been struggling. OSFM staff handled over 90 days of on-call investigation duty for the City in the last year. If they are unable to sustain their program on their own, there are contingency plans for Western Regional staff to take on that responsibility.

A/SFM Mowbray thanked everyone who attended yesterday's program at the convention. The Commissioners, OSFM alumni and the Superintendent's office were invited to attend. The OSFM recognized several of its employees for the great work they have been doing:

- Penny Doty, the Eastern Regional Office Administrative Specialist, received a Commander's Award. She has done the fire fatality report over the last few years and has trained the new Lower Shore secretary to take over that responsibility. Ms. Doty also manages the fire sprinkler contractor licensing program, and is the staff support for the lithium-ion battery safety work group.
- A Unit Citation was presented to the special operations Underwater Hazardous Device Team. The team includes Senior Deputies Dale Ednock, Chris Fenzel (retired), William Potts, Deputy Chief Duane Svites, and Firefighter Jonas Brooks with the Annapolis Fire Department.
- A State Fire Marshal Commendation was presented to Master Deputy Oliver Alkire. He is one of the highest case load producing investigators while also handling K-9, Honor Guard, and Public Information Officer duties.
- Nominees for the 2024 James C. Robertson Deputy State Fire Marshal of the Year were Deputy Timothy McDonald, Lower Eastern Region; Master Deputy Oliver Alkire, Northeast Region; Senior Deputy Timothy McDowell, Southern Region; Senior Deputy William Potts, Special Operations Section; Senior Deputy John Grothe, Upper Eastern Region; and Senior Deputy Adam Rounds, Western Region. The committee selected Deputy Timothy J. McDonald to receive the award.

CHIEF FIRE PROTECTION ENGINEER REPORT

Chief Fire Protection Engineer (CFPE) Bush reported that the agency also has two contract fire protection engineer positions open for the Western Region. One was converted to an administrative aide position but will be converted back. Regarding the engineer intern, a student from Frostburg State University has expressed interest and they will be meeting next week along with Headquarter's FPE Derek Murgatroyd. Part of the intern's role will involve the electronic review of plans. He will be on board through the summer until he returns to school. The transition to electronic review with the new RMS system will be interesting since plans are still being received in many different ways-electronically, handwritten sketches, and hard copy prints.

The agency is still involved with the Maryland Stadium Authority on projects such as Pimlico's redevelopment, some which will involve State property and others being private. The agency is also involved with the new Baltimore Intake Center which is in the planning stage for downtown Baltimore. FPE Murgatroyd has been involved with that project. A new hospital is being constructed in Easton with the OSFM being heavily involved.

CFPE Bush is involved with the lithium-ion battery safety work group whose report for submission to the legislature is due at the end of this year.

The NFPA 1 Fire Code Committee held their second draft meeting at the beginning of June. Some interesting topics include the FARS (Firefighter Air Replacement System) installation requirements for buildings—mostly large buildings and high-rises. It is a system that involves a series of high-pressure piping throughout the building for fire service to access to replenish their air systems. It is yet unsure if this will be an actual code requirement or an annex suggestion. There is a lot of pushback due to the cost and maintenance issues. It was a close vote to maintain it in the annex. The NFPA 101 Life Safety Code Committee will also deliberate this at their July meeting. The systems are designed to reference back to the uniform plumbing code because there currently are no standards on how to build them. Another system being discussed is ERCES (Emergency Responder Communication Enhancement System). These are intended for buildings where radio communications may be inhibited either because of size, construction, location or the type of radio system being used. Some modifications were made in the second draft to make these systems more useable and friendly. As a result of a report from the National Transportation Safety Board regarding gas leaks and explosions, the NFPA 1 Committee is also considering whether to require gas detection systems in some industrial and other occupancies, not just in residential buildings. It may evolve into a community risk reduction topic to teach people if they smell gas to get out of the building. At the candy factory incident in Reading, Pennsylvania, people smelled gas but refused to evacuate and were told not to. A topic for the upcoming Life Safety Code Committee meeting will be valet trash being limited to only sprinklered buildings. Other topics will include carbon monoxide alarms in existing buildings and gas detection systems.

CHAIRMAN REPORT

Chairman Tochtermann inquired if fees were still being collected to which CFPE Bush responded they were but cash and checks are no longer accepted. They are collected electronically through an on-line portal and go into the general fund. A/SFM Mowbray added that fee collection may be one of the frameworks in the new RMS. Invoices will be generated automatically based on the information the engineer or inspector puts into the system. It will then be approved by a supervisor and the customer will be able to see it in their account and pay it electronically. The current portal system is well automated and has been working very well with the money going straight through MSP Finance and then into the general fund.

Chairman Tochtermann noted it has been more than a year since the Commission discussed the fee schedule with regard to covering operational costs and he apologized for the oversight. A/SFM Mowbray advised he was aware this issue should be addressed since the Commission has a legislative responsibility to do an annual review. A meeting on the topic has already been held with the MSP Government Affairs Director. The OSFM has reached out to multiple local jurisdictions such as Frederick County, Montgomery County, and Ocean City as well as some Mid-Atlantic area state fire marshals to obtain samples of their fees. Delaware, West Virginia, Ohio, and New Jersey have already responded. A salary study will also be conducted to determine the actual cost per deputy, inspector, or engineer. He feels confident they can provide the Commission with an informed recommendation and report at the October meeting.

Regarding the single exit stair issue, A/SFM Mowbray advised there will be a work group study with the Department of Labor overseeing it. Michele Vanruesel has already reached out to the OSFM. CFPE Bush has been assigned to that work group.

A/SFM Mowbray also reported another important workgroup that will be coming up is the CSST (Corrugated Stainless Steel Tubing) study which will also be overseen by the Department of Labor. It may be tied into the plumbing code. Deputy Chief Caryn McMahon and FPE Derek Murgatroyd will represent the OSFM on that work group.

Chairman Tochtermann noted the June 4 meeting minutes cannot be approved due to a lack of quorum and also because Secretary Ritchie has not yet received the transcript.

Chairman Tochtermann reported that if he were present, this would be Commissioner Daniel Stevens last meeting. June 30th will finish up his first five-year term and he is not seeking a re-appointment. His health is such that he was recently hospitalized and he and his wife feel his health should be his primary concern. This will create a second vacancy on the Commission. Having inquired to the Stevens if they were aware of anyone who would be a good representative for the southern Maryland area, Jeff Clements has expressed an interest and was present at the convention and today's meeting. He will have to go through the normal Governor's Appointments Office to apply for consideration.

OTHER BUSINESS

Vice Chairman Spriggs commended A/SFM Mowbray and his staff for the professional presentation in dress uniform at yesterday's events. Colonel Butler was present and he also seemed impressed.

Vice Chairman suggested with the new RMS system coming on board that it might be a good opportunity to merge BATS (Bomb Arson Tracking System) into it. A/SFM Mowbray noted that in theory there should be the ability to set up a module for investigations within the system for the entire state and share information and resources.

Commissioner Sanger inquired if the new RMS and NERIS systems will be able to track the type of structure as well as fatalities related to that type of structure. A/SFM Mowbray anticipates having the ability to define those type of things clearly and to capture information at the plan review level and inspection level. Then once the investigation module is integrated it will help focus on specific information. Discussions have occurred with NERIS that, for example, if you have a church, and a vehicle crashes into the church, there is a technical rescue. and then a fire you have different complexities. It is not a good idea to give departments a wide range of options to input. In this scenario the primary incident is a car accident, with a technical rescue, with involvement of fire. So it should be possible to get some finite data without having too many input options.

Having done community fire prevention canvases himself, he is aware that a good number of occupants are overlooked when not at home. He thinks the door hangars are a great idea that should be shared with other jurisdictions. A/SFM Mowbray advised that as part of the agency's public affairs unit Ms. Crisman is taking that type of information and experiences back to fire service partners.

Commissioner Smothers apologized for being late and reiterated Vice Chairman Spriggs comments about the professional appearance of OSFM personnel and the honor guard. In his role with the MSFA he commended the coordination of having OSFM personnel participate in the annual convention. A/SFM Mowbray complimented Honor Guard coordinators Zack Dell and Adam Rounds for their outstanding efforts in organizing such events.

Next Meeting:

August 21, 2025

10:00 a.m.

Laurel Municipal Center

Council Chambers

8103 Sandy Spring Road

Laurel, Prince George's County

It is anticipated the October 16th meeting will be in Pikesville in conjunction with the OSFM anniversary and the taking over of the museum at MSP HQ.

There being no further discussion, the meeting was adjourned.

Respectfully submitted,
(as summarized from transcript provided by eScribers),



Heidi Ritchie, Secretary