

Looking On: The Bright Side Of Life

Right now, we are in the middle of a double whammy recession. Our credit card bills are due from the holiday shopping season and April brings income tax time. Many people are concerned about the security of their jobs. Wage earners are wondering how they are going to pay the bills if their jobs disappear. Communities are making tough decisions, due to decreased tax revenue. I have heard several community leaders from across the state talking about cutting or curtailing vital fire services in order to save money caused by the budget crisis in their area.

What does this poor economy mean to the fire service and what can we do to manage this situation? What do we need to watch out for in these changing times?

Because of the economy, the priorities for almost everyone have changed. We are looking to our new Administration to help us through this crisis. There is a movement to convince President Obama to increase the funding for the Firefighters Grant Program. President Obama has informed us that he would like to invest more money in our infrastructure stimulating the economy. I would urge all of us within the fire service to write letters to our representatives informing them of our financial needs in the areas of equipment, training, and fire prevention programs. The Assistance to Firefighters Grant Program is the right tool to help fund our emergency services. If you have not taken advantage of this program yet, maybe it is time to take another look.

Another bright spot in our economy is the Neighborhood Stabilization Program, an initiative of the U. S. Housing and Urban Development Department. This program helps fund communities that have foreclosed or blighted property areas. As we all know, blighted areas are an invitation to arsonists, the homeless and children looking for an interesting place to play. The money that this program provides helps a community to restore and rebuild residential properties. These properties are then placed back on the market and resold. This increases the tax base, and gives a sense of stability to the community. During these poor economic times, it only makes sense to take advantage of these programs. They bring new money into the community helping to stimulate the local economy. In the past, some communities were reactive to problems like blight. Times have changed. Communities need to take a proactive approach to the problem of blighted areas and this is the perfect program designed to help them do it.

Our country has come to realize the economic impact that the price of oil can have on our standard of living. There can no longer be any doubt that this issue has contributed to the economic bubble that we are currently experiencing. The bright spot here is the increased emphasis concerning the development of alternative energy. These new technological developments will free our country from the large price swings that we have experienced with oil in the past. It is important for the fire service to recognize that this new technology comes to us with a price tag attached to it. New technology brings new needs for training within the fire service. It is important that we zero in on the safety of these new technologies and know what to do if something does go wrong. In some communities, new laws are allowing neighborhood electric vehicles on local roads. These vehicles in general, have a maximum speed of 35 MPH and are 100% battery powered. Some of these electric vehicles use batteries, that when combined, have a very high voltage potential. Hydrogen and liquid natural gas have obvious explosion issues. When we start using new technology, there is always a period of time that becomes a learning curve. These technologies become safer over time because we learn from mistakes that occur with the use and handling of them. It is important that members of our fire service do not become statistics with the mistakes that do occur. So now, more than ever, training is a very important issue. We need to know the best way to resolve these situations, not only for the occupants of these vehicles, but for our own firefighters and medical personnel who put themselves in harms way as our first line of defense.

Ethanol and biodiesel fuels have been around for some time now. They are good alternatives to the cost of imported fuel and the technology surrounding them is another bright spot in our economy. The less oil that we have to import, the stronger our economy will be by keeping our dollars within our border. However, we have seen an alarming rate of home producers who do not always have the proper permits, training or equipment to produce these fuels in or around their homes. The fire service needs to be aware of these dangers. Some home producers are storing large quantities of fuel illegally on their properties. Our Inspection Bureaus need to act on resolving these issues so that this new technology does not become a major fire disaster in our communities. Some communities are setting up ethanol and biodiesel task forces to deal with educating the public on these dangerous practices. It is important that we become energy independent and save money, but not at the price of ignoring safety.

We are now experiencing some areas of concern with the commercial production of ethanol. Commercial producers in rural areas have started shipping large volumes of ethanol by rail. Long trains hauling tanker cars filled with ethanol are then delivering the ethanol to our more populated cities where the demand for fuel is high. The trains are passing right through large residential areas catching many fire departments and emergency planners off guard. The trains then stop in a rail yard and are off loaded to tanker trucks for local delivery. There have been reported cases where thousands of gallons of ethanol are transferred on a daily basis in rail yards surrounded by townhouses and schools. Some community leaders have attempted to stop the large volume transfer of ethanol to trucks in residential areas but federal regulations give railroads broad authority to move freight across our country. Those same regulations give railroads the authority to load and unload product even though there may be a local ordinance against such practice. It pays to have a watchful eye on your community so that proper preplanning, training, and equipment is available for this new type of emergency. For example, fire departments need to be aware that they cannot extinguish ethanol fires with typical foams used to extinguish gasoline. The bright spot is that we as a nation are becoming energy independent.

History has shown us that when our country experiences an economic downturn, people tend to become complacent about fire prevention. Complacency is truly our worst enemy. People are more concerned about how to prioritize which bill they are going to pay first. They may not have the money to replace that out dated or broken smoke detector. They may not have the money to replace the batteries that power these units. The Department of Homeland Security and United States Fire Administrator Greg Cade, have requested that the fire service raise our awareness level concerning complacency in regards to smoke detectors. Between Thanksgiving of 2008 and January 7, 2009, there have been more than 158 fatal fires in the United States resulting in over 200 fire fatalities. "The 2008 holiday season and the start of 2009 may be recorded as one of the deadliest for residential fires in recent memory of the fire service," Cade said. "Not only have there been a significant number of preventable fires, but the occurrences of multiple fatalities resulting from these fires are simply unacceptable within our nation. There should be a smoke alarm protecting every person in this nation today, particularly as we sleep." The bright spot here is that we as a fire service can do something about it. Take action now and talk to your local news media about broadcasting public service announcements reminding our citizens to install and maintain their smoke detectors.

In summery, with the economy slowing down, lets make sure that your community is taking advantage of all the financial opportunities that our government is making available to us. Take the time to work with industry promoting new technology and the safety that goes with it. Finally, we must continue to promote the things that have a proven record of accomplishment saving lives. Smoke detectors and residential sprinkler systems never go to sleep.

This is your opportunity to get the word out there, reminding people who have a lot on their minds these days, to play it safe..... and stay on the bright side of life.