

22nd August 2015

To the Senate Legal and Constitutional Affairs References Committee

Re: Inquiry into the Use of Smoke Alarms to prevent Smoke and Fire Related deaths.

This submission follows the experiences I have had in our building "Versailles"

It is a block of seven apartments. It is not on the road but built down the steps on the slope leading to the Lavender Bay wharf. There is no road access.

In 2004 we received the rather challenging news that our apartment block had been singled out for fire safety procedures. We were warned that our existing building was "deficient in certain aspects of fire safety and must be upgraded to provide an acceptable level of fire safety to the occupants of the building." A Fire Safety Order was to be issued and a Fire Safety Audit was to be carried out. The order was issued by _____, Executive Assessment Officer (Fire Safety) the origin of this order was North Sydney Council. The notice was referred to as Order no 6, issued on 5th July 2004.

The terms of the order were rather intimidating. It had six components. The reasons given for the order were that the fire safety preparedness at Versailles was not adequate to prevent fire, suppress fire or prevent the spread of fire or ensure the safety of persons in the event of fire.

Subsequently we were coerced into many improvements, in itself not such a bad thing. The building required rewiring, there was asbestos discovered in the main area of the hall and had to be replaced at great expense.

A company was chosen by the Body Corporate. They were to supply the alarms, and for direct communication to the Fire station an oversize panel was installed inside the front door of the building. This was referred to as the Notifier (fire indicator panel) and is directly connected to the Fire station (always two brigades attend a call out). This panel requires monthly testing by the supplier and indefinitely at the combined owners corporation expense.

After the completion of this installation our real troubles began. For an amount of time adding up to years this panel was faulty. The supplier refused to take responsibility. It became apparent that too many smoke detectors had been installed. The alarms were consistently being triggered. We had been grossly over serviced, every single room in the building including the balcony areas contained a smoke detector. The individual detectors are very expensive. The fire brigades would turn up at all times of the day and night and finally fines were imposed and these have doubled over the years. Up to \$1500 for a false callout.

This situation was and continues to be very disturbing. Initially the company took away the offending

smoke detectors and after a time, a tiny microscopic beetle was found to be “the culprit.”

The problems continued. The company refused to take responsibility for the alarms and over the next year literally thousands of dollars were drained from our sinking fund. When the detectors in general areas, hallways etc were triggered there was no switch to stop them. The brigades continued to come sometimes in the middle of the night.

The other problem is the maintenance costs. Once an alarm has been triggered the supplier charges a fee to reset the Notifier. If this is on the weekend it can be ever so much more. The average call out fee is quite exorbitant. With the faulty alarms summoning the brigades and then the callout fee on top, the demands on our funds were reaching exhaustion point. On top of all this are the routine set visits from the supplier. We are locked in to this terrible system draining our finances.

I went to a local precinct meeting to repeat this sad refrain and heard of inhabitants of other blocks of flats nearby in a similar position as ours with people forced to live elsewhere due to these unexpected expenses. This is especially difficult for those at vulnerable stages of life. It is a merciless system and many people’s lives are severely impacted.

In a Strata system one loses ones sovereignty. The situation with our faulty system became a bone of contention. The company was trusted by some and treated with suspicion by others. Absentee owners willingly bore the brunt.

After several years we have a little respite, I think by some wonderful stroke of fortune it has now been about three months since the earth shattering alarm has been triggered. However one lives in a now permanent state of apprehension. This is certainly not a healthy way to be.

I would ask the Committee to consider the practicalities of enforcing compliance of modern fire standards in older buildings. We want to comply but consumers need to be protected from rogue operators. Strata Managers who engage contractors need to be accountable as well and not the hapless occupier of a strata unit who invariably has no say in how fire orders are to be satisfied.

Thank you for your consideration.

Yours faithfully,
Jan Allen