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One of my favorite parts of the newspaper is the letters-to-the-editor page. Whether I agree or disagree with the sentiments expressed, I usually find it interesting to read a variety of opinions on an issue. Sometimes, though, I have to wonder what an editor is thinking when they publish a particular letter. The offending letters invariably contain blatantly false information and I often wonder if the press does a disservice in the name of diversity when it prints misleading letters under the veil of fairness.

A recent offender is Lee Jones, director of technical services at the Association of the Wall and Ceiling Industries. In a Viewpoint column in the January 24th issue of *ENR*, Jones attacks the fire code provisions in the new International Building Code. According to Jones, a "fundamental level of protection has been dangerously and unnecessarily compromised."

This assertion is a disservice to the ICC committee members and others who spent thousands of hours over the last several years debating the requirements in the ICC codes. As Hank Martin, Sr. Regional Director, Construction Codes and Standards, at the American Iron & Steel Institute, correctly states: "Minority opinions, such as that expressed by Mr. Jones, were presented on countless occasions. Proposals that had merit were accepted. Proposals that would have made the code unnecessarily conservative and thus made new construction more expensive were rejected by the IBC Committee and finally by the ICC at their annual meeting in St. Louis in September last year."

Martin also sheds some light on some of Lee's misleading statistics. For example, Lee cites an $8.6 billion fire loss due to fire in 1998 in support of his arguments for more conservative code requirements. However, that figure "seriously overstates the structural fire losses as it includes vehicle and highway related fires, fires outside of structures and wildland fires. Of that $8.6 billion in property only $3.1 billion represents fires in buildings regulated by the International Building Code. A further review of the fire loss statistics from 1977 to 1998 indicates that the number of structure fires have seen a 53% reduction—this during a period where the use of fire sprinklers has been increasing due to local ordinances and building code requirements. Could there be a correlation? Modern codes increasingly recognize the effectiveness of sprinklers in suppressing fires before they get out of control."

Lee questions the reliability of sprinklers and seems to indicate that passive systems are more reliable. If there are any valid statistical data comparing the reliability of passive versus active systems, it should be published for review.

John Ruddy and Socrates Ioannides of Structural Affiliates International in Nashville examined recent fire statistics and made some interesting conclusions. Their examination shows that "an active protection system (sprinklers) is much more effective than a passive system. The absence or presence of protection on the structure had little to no influence on the fire safety of the created environment. Redirecting money from fire protection to fire suppression would have a greater influence on improving life safety than reducing allowable building areas to result in more fire protection. If reliability is a concern, let us take measures to improve reliability. Adjustments to the height and area tables of IBC 2000 appear to have been made thoughtfully, cautiously and rationally."

Concluded Ruddy and Ioannides: "The provisions of the 2000 IBC should not be viewed as reductions in life safety but rather adjustments to provide the appropriate level of life safety. Significant advances have been made in Fire Engineering. It is possible to model the structure using finite element techniques and simulate the behavior of a building during a fire incident. Computer programs such as FASBUS and FIRES T3, as well as ad hoc software developed in conjunction with the UK Cardington fire tests, have demonstrated the conservative nature of current US regulations."