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Rewrite of Washington, DC, Building Code Offers Unique Opportunity to Improve Life Safety in Buildings—No Matter what the Building Height

Arlington, VA, April 7, 2011— The District of Columbia will soon consider adoption of the 2009 building codes; an opportunity to improve life safety in commercial buildings by adopting Section 1024 of the International Fire Code (IFC) and International Building Code (IBC), and Chapter 46 of the IFC that require the installation of photoluminescent (PL) exit path markings and Floor Identification Signs, along with many other Life Safety improvements. The Photoluminescent Safety Association (PSA), the trade association for the PL industry, strongly supports the addition of the IBC and IFC language to the District's building code.

Photoluminescent, or glow-in-the-dark, products improve safety and reduce energy consumption through such products as exit signs, low-location egress pathway marking systems, and general safety signage. They are the environmentally responsible way to improve building safety because they use no power, do not use radioactive or other hazardous materials like most other exit signs, and last for many years with zero or low maintenance. PL safety markings may be easily installed.

Introduction of PL Exit Path Markings in buildings is based on the proven fact that PL Exit Path Markings increase the speed of occupant evacuation. The National Institute of Standards and Technology study on the Collapse of The World Trade Center Towers documented the successful evacuation of over 16,000 survivors in 102 minutes on September 11, 2001, where PL Exit Path Markings were installed, vs. the 1993 bombing evacuation time of 6 hours without PL Exit Path Markings. The Port of Authority of New York added PL Exit Path Markings

subsequent to the 1993 bombing of the World Trade Center—a decision that saved the lives of many occupants of the World Trade Center complex on 9/11.

After 9/11 New York became the first city to formally recognize the value of PL egress markings to accelerate the evacuation of occupants from high-rise buildings, especially after the 18-hour blackout that occurred in late 2003. In 2004 the city passed Local Law 26 that required a range of retroactive and prospective provisions, including installation of photoluminescent exit path markings in high-rise commercial buildings. Other jurisdictions have subsequently approved similar legislation. The GSA also recently revised its specifications and now requires PL exit path markings in all government buildings, whether owned or leased. (Note: See the PSA backgrounder on codes that support PL exit markings for additional details.)

In 2009 the International Building Code was amended to include a requirement that all new non-residential buildings over 75 feet in height must install PL Exit Path Markings in all enclosed emergency exit stairwells. That same year the International Fire Code was amended to include the same requirement. The 75 foot height requirement is based on the maximum reach of a fire department ladder truck. Buildings above 75 feet in height limit fire fighters' options for handling emergencies and building evacuation. This reach restriction on fire department ladder trucks applies to the vehicles currently in use with the District of Columbia Fire Department.

The IBC and IFC are model building codes. The IBC addresses fire prevention regarding building construction and design. The IFC address fire prevention regarding the operation of a completed and occupied building. In some cases they address similar issues, such as the use of PL products in emergency exit stairwells.

Currently the District's building code does not include IBC Section 1024; the fire code does not include IFC chapter 46. During a review process that will begin in earnest later this year, District code officials will have the opportunity to add this language requiring PL markings by adopting both.

Many organizations are installing PL egress markings regardless of the height of the structure because in an emergency PL products provide building occupants with a continuous pathway

delineation for egress under all emergency conditions. The Pentagon, as one example, has installed PL markings throughout the entire building—not just in the stairwells, in spite of the fact that the Pentagon is well below the 75 foot height limitation of most fire departments.

According to PSA President Phil Befumo, “In a fire emergency, smoke rises and will obscure exit signs because they are installed above the door. Photoluminescent floor proximity markings, leading to the exit, offer the most reliable way for occupants to find the exit door.” More importantly, during a fire emergency the on-site senior fire department official will require the complete deactivation of ALL electricity to the building, further justifying the value of non-electric, fail-safe, PL exit signs and other emergency egress markings.

The National Research Council of Canada’s studies of occupant evacuation rates with and without Photoluminescent Egress Path Markings concluded that the speed of evacuation was faster with PL materials than with just standard emergency lighting. The study was first done in April 1999 and again in June of 2007 with the same results: The time required for the evacuation of occupants was decreased. The test buildings chosen by the National Research Council of Canada were 10-story buildings.

Befumo notes, “Decreasing the time required to evacuate a building under emergency conditions is a high priority for any building, whether or not the occupants are in a commercial or federal building. In any building over 75 feet it must be a very high priority. When there’s an emergency in any building in the District of Columbia, code officials can help reduce injury and save lives by including the IBC and IFC provisions involving PL products. When there’s a fire, we want building occupants to be able to see the exit—no matter what floor they are on.”

PSA is dedicated to generating broad-based acceptance of safety-grade photoluminescent products. Photoluminescent products improve safety through such products as exit signs, low-level egress pathway marking systems, and general safety signage.