

Question of the Month: (April 2010)

“I was just curious if there are ordinances prohibiting outdoor fires at apartment complexes? You know, the free-standing fireplaces you can put on a deck or patio. My neighbor has one, and it seems safe enough but it generates a ton of smoke into neighboring apartments”

The simple answer is... maybe. I spoke with our Deputy Fire Marshal Larry Boatwright who cited from the International Fire Code which is used as the standard by most fire districts. I also sought out advice from Coeur d'Alene's Inspector Brian Halverson and Northern Lake's Inspector Tyler Drechsel. All are in agreement of what the code allows in regards to use of open flame devices in multi-unit facilities in their respective fire districts.

Under the section addressing “open flames”, more specifically section 308.3.1 which speaks about “open-flame cooking devices”, it is stated that “Charcoal burners and other open-flame cooking devices shall not be operated on combustible balconies or within 10 feet of combustible construction.” A free-standing fireplace would fit under this category whether used for cooking or not.

Under the section above, open-flame cooking devices may not be operated on decks which can catch on fire (wood, plastics etc.) or within 10 feet of any construction (house, shed, garage etc.) that is capable of catching on fire.

But wait! There are a couple of exceptions that would make open-flame devices permissible.

- If living in a one or two family dwelling.
- Where buildings, balconies and decks are protected by an automatic sprinkler system.

For readers who are now asking themselves – “What about my propane barbeque?” That's a good question. Under the same code, section 308.3.1.1 to be exact, states: “Liquefied-petroleum-gas-fueled cooking devices: LP-gas burners having an LP-gas container with a water capacity greater than 2.5 pounds (nominal 1 pound LP-gas capacity) shall NOT be located on combustible balconies or within 10 feet of combustible construction. EXCEPTION: One and two-family dwellings”.

A one pound LP-gas container is the small green can that one might use for a small camp stove. Most commonly used home propane barbeques use five gallon propane tanks and are restricted for use unless one of the exceptions applies.

In a nutshell, what does all this fire code language really mean? For multi-family dwellings (Apartment complexes/condominiums of three or more family units), cooking devices which produce a flame may not be used on combustible decking or within 10 feet of combustible construction unless the building, balcony and deck is protected by an automatic sprinkler system.

We have had several fires in recent years involving cooking stoves and barbeques used improperly on a deck or porch of apartment complexes. It is imperative for one's safety, and the safety of the other residents that extreme caution be used when using any heating or cooking source and should be done so while following fire codes. A little side note: if you are a renter, insurance for your personal effects is extremely reasonable and highly recommended, just in case.

If you have any questions about this topic, you should discuss it with your property or building manager or you are always encouraged to contact your local fire department.

If you have a question about emergency services in your area, please submit your question to "Ask Firefighter Jim" at askffjim@kootenaifire.com. Visit our web page at www.kootenaifire.com for additional information and to read archives of previously answered questions under the link, "Prevention".