

Smothering a Fire Code

Only by the greatest good fortune were no lives lost in the devastating series of New York Telephone Company fires and the recent blaze in the World Trade Center. Property damage and interruption of the city's vital life processes were bad enough, but both fires point up the critical need for the newly revised fire code.

The high-rise building has turned out to have unique vulnerabilities: conduits that make raceways for fires, the extraordinary stack action of a tall structure, automatic elevators attracted by heat, highly combustible plastic equipment and furnishings that burn with noxious fumes. The potential for catastrophe has become horribly clear.

The new law calls for sophisticated signal systems, tenant evacuation teams, and a choice of sprinkler installation or pressurized stairs, in both new and old buildings. It requires compliance by January 1976; but beyond the filing of plans, virtually nothing has been done.

The building owners and the city are currently involved in bitter controversy about cost and practicality. Many owners, already in financial trouble, are reluctant to make the necessary massive investments and they are indulging in calculated foot-dragging.

Compliance is not even required at the World Trade Center, which is exempt from city codes as a creature of the autonomous Port Authority. To add insult to injury, New York State is about to use \$5 million of taxpayers' money to put sprinklers on all of the Trade Center's state office floors.

The city is willing to be flexible in such things as the staging of expensive installations. Admittedly, the costs of the new regulations are high. But the risks are even higher, in terms of holocaust and human life. Fiddling may be a classic evasion, but it is no substitute for compliance with the law.