

15 MINUTES

Backflow Prevention: Check

Fire Marshal Don Ward Inspects the new Publix

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The general public was showing up en masse last Friday morning to inspect the new Publix grocery store at First Street Village, near downtown Fort Myers. Two ladies in Capri pants and bright pink shirts moved across the parking lot towards the automatic doors, as if guided by radar. They probably came to check out the fresh displays of produce, the canned goods, the flower arrangements, the deli meat.

Fire Marshal Don Ward was there that day for inspections of a different kind: to make sure the building's safety features, such as exit signs, emergency lighting, and smoke detectors, are up to code. Ward had watched the supermarket being built from his office across the street, and drove here today in the fire department's Jeep, an interruption to the executive officers meeting he attends every Friday morning.

He was there to check the workings of a "double detector valve," a device meant to prevent "backflow." That's when the fire department's sprinkler water, which is gritty and oily from sitting in the pipes for long periods of time, is drawn back into the city's drinking water supply. He walked around the side of the building, pointing out the

sprinkler valves that would spray that water from the ceiling in a fire.

"My job isn't to fight fires, but to inspect buildings," he said. "We're like the law enforcement division of the fire department."

Ward was the chief building inspector for the city of Fort Myers for seven years, before transferring to the fire department in 2000, to do a similar job. Before that, he was an electrical inspector for the town of Andover, Mass., where he was born and raised.

"I've been in construction my whole life," he said.

If he had only one word to remember his hometown, that word would be "history."

"Andover was an incorporated town in 1620, so it has a lot of history," he said.

Ward has three children who are all grown and have their own families. He started counting the grandchildren and had to use both hands.

"Nine," he finally concluded. "All my family is still in New England."

Ward said he wants to spend the summers there, and the winters in Florida, when he retires.

"I have relatives scattered all over Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Maine," he said.

Fortunately though, his wife lives

with him in East Fort Myers.

"My wife and I both own Harley Davidson motorcycles and we ride just about every weekend."

He owns an "Ultra Classic"; she, a "Soft Tail Custom," Ward said.

He's also a member of the fire department's motorcycle club, "Fire and Iron," which is made up of firefighters and medics. They sometimes ride for causes: children's organizations, cancer funds, union charities.

Ward said he inspects the emergency safety features on all the city's big commercial and residential projects. He pointed across the street from Publix, at the five pyramid shaped tops of the newly built High Point Place towers, jutting into the sky above the Caloosahatchee River.

"We just finished work on those towers," he said. "Phase one was just CO'd."

That means the two Western towers had been given the "Certificate of Occupancy," and the city considers them safe to life in.

"We'd been in there for months," he said. "It's a lot to check."

The three towers to the East aren't ready to be inhabited, he said, according to city code. That's Phase two.

He seemed pleased that the new Publix is going to be practically a stones

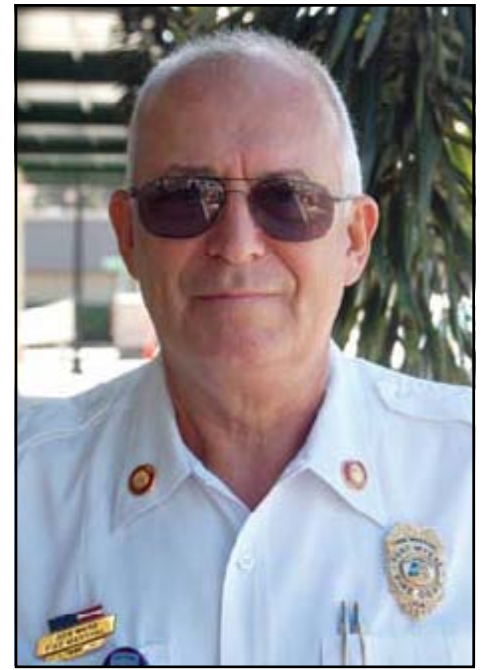


PHOTO EVAN WILLIAMS

Fire Marshal Don Ward

throw away from his office at 2180 W. First Street. "It's going to be handy for us at work," he said. "We'll probably come over to get sandwiches."

Finished with his inspection, Ward left in his Jeep, just as the two ladies in Capri pants walked out. They carried their bunches of little plastic bags out of the parking lot on foot, and crossed McGregor Boulevard; apparently, they live in the neighborhood. ■

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