

Fire drill highlights evacuation faults

By Jean White

Some Auckland city high-rise buildings are using a single fire alarm system which is not optimal in an emergency evacuation, according to fire safety experts.

While most buildings in Auckland use a staged evacuation system, Russell Dixon, a fire safety officer with the Auckland City Central Fire Department, says a few buildings still rely on an older-style, single alarm system.

Another fire safety officer, Fred Oates, says most new buildings, including 151 Queen St and the ANZ Tower, have the new staged system where not all floors are evacuated simultaneously.

A fire drill at AUT highlighted the problem of evacuating thousands of occupants with a single alarm system.

On April 28 the alarm rang in the 16-floor Arts Faculty building. More than 2000 students headed for the stairwells — and got stuck in the crowd.

Barnaby Sharp, a graduate diploma student, got stuck on the 15th floor for 10 minutes before he was able to enter the stairwell. "The evacuation procedures," he says, "were hopelessly inadequate."

Amanda Cameron, also a grad dip student on the 15th floor, says the evacuation procedure for what turned out to be a fire drill "stank".

"I was concerned that if it was a real fire, it would be a dangerous situation — too many people, not enough space."

Andrew Melville, communications manager for AUT, says his overall impression is that things flowed well during the evacuation. "We'll improve the system if there is any feedback. It is a challenge to do it smoothly."

Mr Melville says he doesn't think AUT could ever have an evacuation procedure that is comfortable for everyone because there will always be fear. "Slowly shuffling down 15 flights is never going to feel great, but there is no safer place to be than the stairwell

during an evacuation."

Mr Oates says 10 to 15 years ago all fire alarm systems were the same. "Then we got innovative and designed systems to meet the needs of individual buildings."

Mr Oates says although the current evacuation scheme for the arts building has been approved, he approached the owners within the last year and again after the recent drill recommending a system known as "cascading".

The cascading system involves updating the current alarm to one that would evacuate two floors above and below the fire first, then other floors in turn. The exact order of evacuation would be up to the fire engineers' recommendation for the building.

Mr Oates says some building owners won't spend the extra money for the comfort of their tenants, but admits cascading systems can be expensive.

Fire safety officer Russell Dixon says there are other buildings in Auckland that are a similar height and size to the AUT building and have a similar evacuation system, but they are in the minority.

Mr Oates says the fire service hasn't heard from the owners of the arts building about the proposed new scheme. He says AUT may choose not to change its system because it passes code and it is not required under law.

"If the situation gets worse we'll recommend it again," he says.

Jon Lesquereux is manager of the commercial portfolio at Kiwi Income Property Trust, the owner of the AUT arts building. He says he was not aware his company had been approached by the fire department. "We contract our day-to-day service of the building to CB Richard Ellis Ltd, but that doesn't negate our responsibility to it."

He says his firm is a substantial property owner that receives written reports about its buildings, so he is surprised he hasn't heard about updating the AUT fire alarm system.

"The evacuation procedures were hopelessly inadequate."
Barnaby Sharp —
AUT student

Paul Latif, manager of engineering and facilities at CB Richard Ellis, says the company has been in contact with AUT's property department, but would not comment on whether changes would be made.

AUT Facilities Management property administrator Vivian Zou says she hasn't heard about the graduated alarm system proposal by the fire department.

Mr Melville says the training provided to the wardens by Evac Services will continue. He says Evac Services should be asking the fire wardens to inform the students on procedure.

He says the fire service has not approached AUT's health and safety people to recommend the new cascading system. "But we will be looking at adding visible alarms like a flashing light for deaf people."

Student Kate Foreman says there was confusion as to whether both stairwells could be used. She left the queue at one stairwell and tried the other only to get stuck above the 11th floor for seven minutes where the stairwell door was held open.

Mr Oates says the most important thing is to get to an exit. "Once you're in the stairwell you should be safe as long as the stairwell doors are closed."

Owen Hemby, a grad dip student, says people don't seem to be aware of safety issues in the building such as closing the stairwell doors. On an earlier occasion, he noticed one of the fifth floor doors had been propped open by a chair. "It was a hot day so I assume they were trying to let air in," he says.

He says students have never been given instructions on fire procedure. "Not in our orientation or at any time."

Andrew Nippierd of Evac Services Ltd, which is contracted by CB Richard Ellis, says he holds a meeting with the fire wardens of the building every six months where he goes through what each fire warden has to do and schedules a trial evacuation.

"I tell the fire wardens their prime duty is to motivate the students to get out, and make sure floors are empty, and then report to the head fire warden."

In light of the crowding during the recent fire drill, he says it would be "a

wise move" for the fire wardens to advise students what to do at the beginning of the term.

Mr Nippierd says April 28 was chosen for the drill to test the building when it was full of students.

"For the sheer volume of people, the total time of 15 minutes to get everyone out of the building was good," he says.

Nandy Nathu, deputy principal of 800 students at the NZ International College, on levels G-4, is head fire warden for the building. He receives the floor warden's reports that an area has been evacuated. He says the building was at maximum capacity on the day of the drill.

"We never did that before. The man from Evac Services says that was amazing, to get everyone out in 15 minutes."

"No one should ever panic. The sprinklers will come on and the stairwells are safe."

Elliot Roberts, president of AuSM, says there wasn't time to address the evacuation issue at the last Arts Faculty meeting.



PHOTO: JEAN WHITE

CHAOS: Students stuck on the 11th floor of the AUT Arts Faculty building during the evacuation.

AUT explosion still puzzles power supply investigators

By Jean White

The cause of an explosion that blew out a door and set off sprinklers in the maintenance supply room of the AUT Arts Faculty building on Tuesday, May 11 is still unknown.

Vector Electricity, which is responsible for the equipment that supplies power to the building, still does not know why the incident occurred in the basement of the city building.

Denise Bailey, communications manager for Vector, says a fuse exploded in the basement's transformer. She says it was repaired and nothing further is required.

But she admits it was an unusual incident. "The cause of the explosion is still unknown," she says.

The sprinkler system activated an alarm which alerted the fire service.

Neil Petri, station officer at Balmoral Fire Station, was doing a shift at the Parnell station that day. "We were on our way to town on another call, but we got re-directed."

Firemen saw a lot of smoke at the scene. "The door was blown off and there was flooding in the lower basement," says Mr Petri.

Mr Petri says a fire had been put out by the sprinklers. "The sprinkler system acted like a curtain keeping the smoke inside, but then the smoke spread downstairs and throughout the ground floor. We call it smoke travel."

As well as water and smoke dam-

age there was also a lot of electrical damage.

"Once the transformer blew, the water and electrical aspect became dangerous."

Vector staff were told to come urgently. The fire officers did a search and rescue up to the first floor to make sure it was clear.

"There was a chance of a secondary explosion as a second generator, filling with water from the sprinklers, was still pumping power into the main switchboard in the car park."

Ms Bailey says 446 customers were affected, but most had their power restored within the hour. Vector worked through the night to restore power to the AUT arts building.

Vivian Zou, the property administrator at AUT, says 70 per cent of power was returned by Wednesday and by Thursday the school was back at full power. "It was just an accident," she says. "It was not AUT's or the landlord's responsibility."

Andrew Melville, communications manager at AUT, says things ran smoothly on the day. "We were quite heartened that everything worked — the sprinkler system, the alert to the fire department — and no one was injured."

Students arriving at the building on Tuesday morning were advised that classes had been cancelled for the day.

"We don't anticipate any further problems," says Ms Bailey.

KFC's chicken supplier GM-free, for now

By Dean Campbell

Kentucky Fried Chicken customers will not be eating chicken fed with genetically modified soy meal in the near future, after a demand that its new chicken supplier sources non-GM feed.

KFC is switching its chicken supplier from Tegel to Inghams, which also supplies McDonald's.

The KFC contract was confirmed 18 months ago and comes into effect in July.

KFC's previous supplier, Tegel, has had a GM-free policy since 2001 when KFC asked — after customer demand — for its chicken supply not to be fed GM soy.

Until now Inghams has often used GM soy meal to feed its New Zealand bred chickens because it is easier to source than the non-GM variety.

Now Inghams has decided to source its next two shipments of soy from a non-GM supplier, reportedly after a request from McDonald's, which is one of Inghams biggest customers.

KFC could have found itself on the end of anti-GM protests, according to Greenpeace GM campaigner Steve Abel, if it had breached the commitment it made to non-GM feed in 2001.

Inghams' official policy is that none of its chickens are genetically modified and none contain any genetically modified content.

But that policy — outlined in a

May release by Inghams — did go on to say that small amounts of GM soy may be fed to its chickens, because of a lack of supply of non-GM soy.

Inghams traditionally import up to 50,000 tonnes of GM soy into New Zealand in a year.

Greenpeace New Zealand launched a GE-free food guide in May that classified Inghams as a company whose products may contain GM crop-derived ingredients or animal feed.

Inghams says it chooses its chicken feed based on quality, then sustainable supply and price.

This often leads to it buying GM soy meal from the United States.

McDonald's has now announced that it will urge Inghams to source non-GM feed.

The chicken suppliers' next two shipments of feed are non-GM soy from Brazil.

McDonald's was the subject of a series of dramatic protests by Greenpeace in May.

The organisation has stopped protesting as a result of McDonald's request to Inghams.

The director of McDonald's corporate relations, Liam Jeory, says the company has a policy of not selling GM food to customers, and demands the chickens from Inghams have not been fed GM soy meal.

He says McDonald's tests chicken from Inghams, and has found it safe.

Greenpeace has been campaigning against McDonald's as part of a world-wide effort against GM.

Although an 18-month moratorium on genetic engineering in New Zealand imposed by the Government has been lifted, Greenpeace GM Campaigner Steve Abel says there remains a "defacto moratorium in place".

Companies like Pam's, Kellogg's, and now Inghams, are moving away from GM as a result of public demand for GM-free products.

Abel says customers are just not demanding GM food.

Jeory says there are other factors to consider when choosing a chicken supplier.

"Like the reliability of supply, and the welfare of the chickens for example, both areas that Inghams are good at," he says

Francis Wevers, of the Life Sciences Network, addressed the issue of supply in a *New Zealand Herald* article in May, saying in 18 to 24 months it will be impossible to buy soy meal in the global market that isn't GM.

Steve Abel disagreed in the same *Herald* issue. He said GM soy is yielding less than conventional soy, and market demand will see current non-GM soy suppliers remain GM-free.

He says it's good news for the environment and the anti-GM public that McDonald's has asked Inghams to seek a non-GM food supply.

A representative from KFC declined to comment on why it was changing supplier.