

# The Plaza Condominium

## ORIGINAL FIRE PROTECTION SYSTEM BECOMES BLESSING IN DISGUISE FOR PLAZA CONDOMINIUM

Back in September 2006, a service call was made to Fire Alarm Maintenance Company (FAMCO) of Aston, PA, a suburb of Philadelphia. The call came from the Plaza Condominium, a 14-story high-rise located right on Atlantic City's legendary Boardwalk. The nature of the call? The Plaza's fire alarm system had failed and required urgent attention.

Upon arriving on site, FAMCO technicians determined that the panel, for lack of a better term, had self-destructed. And despite every effort to restore the control panel to normal operation, it was completely unsalvageable.

"It was an old, outdated system, one that had been out of production for about 15 years," said Ken Scott, president of FAMCO, which had acquired the service and repair contract for the Plaza's system. "There was no technical support being provided for it anymore, no parts being manufactured. This system was clearly on its way out – permanently."

It was the original system from the building's opening in 1965 and although Plaza management was unaware of it at the time, it turned out to be a blessing in disguise. The Plaza started a search for a more modern, efficient system that would give the residents of the Plaza's 158 luxury units a new system to protect them and their belongings.

Still, it didn't seem like a blessing when it happened. After contacting the Atlantic City fire marshal, apprising him of the situation, and informing him that immediate action would be taken, the Plaza was forced to go into a "fire watch" mode. This involved having a guard continually walking through the building on



*The Plaza is a 14-story high-rise condominium on Atlantic City's Boardwalk.*

alert for any fire events and, if one were to arise, reporting it to the proper authorities, since any automatic warning capabilities were no longer available. What's more, Dr. Claude Damico, general manager of the Plaza, along with the rest of the building's management, was faced with the daunting task – and associated expense – of finding a suitable replacement for the system.

The existing system was prone to false alarms due to its old technology and comprised of a single, conventional-type panel board, it was not addressable, and unable to pinpoint the exact location of a fire event when the alarm went off.

And while there were 110-volt horns located throughout the hallways, there were no sounding devices in the individual units. Consequently, if a resident were in the shower

or listening to loud music, he or she might not hear the horn and would thus be unaware that a fire might be spreading. Granted, there were sprinklers in each of the units, but those played no part in giving the resident early warning in the event of a real problem.

Ultimately, Damico and the rest of Plaza management turned to FAMCO to provide a solution. As long as the new system was effective, easy to use, and reasonably priced, it was decided that FAMCO's recommendation would be trusted.

Without any hesitation, Scott proposed a system from Silent Knight, a part of the Honeywell Life Safety group and a leading provider of fire alarm solutions for small and mid-size institutions as well as commercial sites. His extensive prior experience with the Silent Knight product line made him more than comfortable with his choice.

"I've been using a variety of Silent Knight products throughout my career," he said. "I've built two central fire stations using their equipment, including digital receivers and transmitters. FAMCO actually became one of Silent Knight's earliest Engineered Systems Distributors (ESD), so recommending their system was a relatively easy decision."

At the heart of the Plaza's new system was the IFP-1000VIP, an intelligent analog/addressable fire alarm control panel (VIP) combined with an integrated single channel voice evacuation system. Because the system is addressable, it allows the user to exactly pinpoint the location of a fire event, not simply the floor or zone.

With all of the critical user interface controls at the main panel, operation and programming of the entire system is extremely simple. The firmware has features such as detector sensitivity, day/night thresholds, drift compensation, pre-trouble maintenance alert, and calibration

trouble alert. Three field programmable user messages are integral to the system's evacuation capabilities.

The speed of installation was a critical consideration for Damico, who needed to minimize the system downtime and ensure her guests were never without protection.

"Like all of the Silent Knight panels, the IFP-1000 can utilize the existing wiring – no special shielded or twisted pair wiring is required," said Scott. "Consequently, we were able to install the panel quickly, replace all the in-unit and hallway smoke detectors with addressable models, and interface the panel with the other existing devices to create a fully operational system in just two weeks. The system still needed work, but the Plaza at least had the same level of protection they had before their system broke down.

"Actually, within just two days, we had the panel in, all the audibles working, and a pull station at the front desk. Because there is a security guard at the front desk 24/7, he could reach over, activate the pull station and quickly evacuate the whole building in case of a fire event. So technically, they had a working, albeit rudimentary, system within 48 hours."

Scott added that his selection of Silent Knight was made partly because he knew they would have his panel in stock.

"Generally, the products I need from Silent Knight are readily available. In this case, that was a must. We just didn't have time to wait."

Once this "patchwork" installation was behind them, Scott and his team of technicians undertook the full process in earnest. Near the end of September, his people began rewiring the entire building floor by floor to adapt it to the new system, which involved connection to the new ancillary devices and compliance with current building and fire codes. These ancillary devices included the addition of speakers in every unit. Unlike the old hallway horns, these speakers could be easily heard over any ambient noise within a unit, a fact that was established by performing a sound level (DBA) test in each unit.

In addition, because the voice evacuation sys-

tem allows for verbal messages, fire department personnel would be able to pick up the system microphone and provide tenants with specific instructions on what action to take – exit the building, go to the roof, avoid the stairs, etc.

The Plaza is now connected to a central station, monitored and operated by FAMCO. This station uses the latest technology to provide 24-hour monitoring of the alarm system. Whenever the alarm detects an emergency condition, the FAMCO control station computers receive a coded signal, and all pertinent information is instantly displayed to one of their personnel. Within seconds, FAMCO notifies the staff of the Plaza, the fire, police and all responding parties.

According to Scott, the job was not without its challenges due to the nature of the facility. "It's one thing when you're working at a commercial site," he said. "But when you're working in people's homes, they are much more particular, and rightly so. We had to make sure we hid all the wiring in each unit, and that we kept the tenant disruption to an absolute minimum."

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Damico was not only impressed with the professionalism of the FAMCO technicians during the installation, she was very pleased with the assistance FAMCO provided in the transition to this complex system.

"Perhaps the greatest challenge is to reach a comfort level with sophisticated technology," noted Dr. Damico. "Since the present system is state of the art, it requires some instruction regarding its use, which is exactly what the FAMCO people did. Each phase of the installation was explained and demonstrated to management and staff. Plus, instructions were provided to us as to the procedures to follow if an alarm was triggered."

Thus far, the system is performing up to standards. Thankfully, there have been no fire events to test the system, but there have also



*Part of the extensive product installation at the Plaza.*

been no false alarms. This is notable, given that the previous system was generating one or two of them per month.

The success of the Plaza system has also reaped additional rewards for Scott and FAMCO, as his company has been awarded a project in a Philadelphia high-rise and two jobs at Widener University in Chester, PA, all of which will use IFP-1000 VIP panels.

Of course, Scott himself would tell you that the real reward for the Plaza project is the security his company has been able to provide for the residents of this upscale living area – a sentiment echoed by Damico.

"This equipment has provided complete coverage for the building, including all the common areas and every unit, thus providing peace of mind, knowing that in a time of emergency, communication can be made throughout the entire building."

Ironically, it may not have happened without the failure of an outdated, outmoded fire-protection system. Blessings certainly come in a variety of interesting disguises.