



STATE OF ARKANSAS
GOVERNOR SARAH HUCKABEE SANDERS
DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC SAFETY
DIVISION OF EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT



MIKE HAGAR
SECRETARY

A.J. GARY
DIRECTOR

November 10, 2023

Aliza Jones
Arkansas Department of Education
810 S. 15th Street
Lavaca, AR 72941

Re: Mountain Home School District
Existing (Big Top Building)

Dear Ms. Jones:

This office has been in contact with the Mountain Home Fire Marshal, Chief Shawn Lofton concerning the Big Top Structure that covers existing educational buildings. It is my understanding that this structure was constructed to keep from replacing existing roof damage to the existing buildings and that this was constructed during the early 1990's. and would either have been regulated by the 1992 or 1999 Arkansas Fire Prevention Codes, Volume I and II based on the 1991 and 1992 Standard Fire and Building Codes. My first question is, were the architectural plans submitted to the local AHJ or the State of Arkansas for plan review, and if so, is there any documentation of the plan review? In my email to you on August 23, 2023, I misquoted when I stated that these codes required that fire sprinklers for a Group E when the structure exceeded 15,000 square feet. Fire sprinklers in Group E occupancies were not required until the 2002 Arkansas Fire Prevention Codes, based on the 2000 International Fire Codes, and then when the square footage exceeded 20,000 square feet.

On August 9, 2023, this office visited the "Big Top Building" at the request of Chief Lofton and also to address the issues that Mr. Robert Weidling had made. These issues were addressed with the school staff and a plan action was made verbally and Chief Lofton stated that he would reinspect at a later date.

Now as far a recommendation on what should be done with the structure, natural from a Fire Marshal and a firefighter viewpoint, we would like to see every structure protected by a fire sprinkler system. However, this is not enforceable when not required by Fire and Building Codes. In my August 23, 2023, email to you I stated "from a Fire Marshal and firefighters' standpoint, the structure needs to be removed and replaced. But this will be the decision of the local school district". And to state that the structure should be condemned, I believe this is not in order at this time, even though this structure provides a serious hazard to firefighters during firefighting operations, as far as day-to-day operations, it does not appear to present a danger to staff and students to occupy. I would however recommend that the Mountain School District employ a fire protection engineer to do a major inspection of the school to ensure that all required fire walls, fire separation walls and fire barriers are intact and that all penetrations have been properly sealed. Contact their fire alarm contractor to ensure that all alarm systems in



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existing structures under the “Big Top” are interconnected. Install additional smoke or heat detectors in the attic space.

When structures are designed to current codes today and in past code eras, firefighting operations are taken into fact and designed to provide protection for firefighters, apparently this was not considered when this structure was designed and constructed.

This office will always be available to the Mountain Home Fire Marshal’s Office and Arkansas Department of Education for any assistance that they may request.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Dennis Free".

Dennis Free, Interim Fire Marshal
Division of Fire Protection Services
Arkansas Department of Public Safety
Bld. 9501 Camp Robinson
North Little Rock, AR 72199
Office: (501) 683-6740
24-7: (501) 519-3803

Cc: Chief Shawn Lofton
Tim Cain
Tyrel Pace
Desiree Palculict
Barry Burke