

The Merchants' Association of New York

"To foster the trade and welfare of New York"

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54-60 (OLD NO. 66-72) LAFAYETTE ST.

March 27th, 1911.

Hon. William J. Gaynor, Mayor;
City Hall,
New York City.

Dear Sir:

The shocking calamity of Saturday, by which about 150 persons lost their lives in a factory fire, makes imperative the consideration of what this community is doing to protect the lives and property of its people against such awful destruction.

This City is now spending upwards of \$8,000,000. a year for the control of fires, but we may safely say that the measures taken by it for the prevention of fires, or for the control of fires in their incipency, are fragmentary, inadequate, illogical and in large degree resultless. At least five divisions of government are concerned with this function, and no one of them performs it well. The result of delegating this function to several distinct governmental agencies is conflicting jurisdiction, half-way performance of the function, feeble enforcement of the law, constant and needless destruction of property, and an occasional terrible calamity involving great loss of human life.

The branches of government each of which has partial and conflicting jurisdiction over this subject, are the Building Department, the Tenement House Department, the Fire Department, the Department of

Water Supply, Gas & Electricity, and the State Bureau of Factory Inspection. None of these has the comprehensive powers necessary to deal effectively with fire prevention. The Building Department and the Tenement House Department have jurisdiction over structural features and fire escapes; the Department of Water Supply, Gas & Electricity has control over electric wiring; the Fire Department has control of preventive appliances; and the State Bureau of Factory Inspection has control over sanitary conditions, but none has the comprehensive power of coordinating all the conditions necessary to safety and necessary to continuous and effective inspection and enforcement of law, without which safety is impossible.

The Merchants' Association of New York, therefore, has consistently advocated during the past three years the concentration in the hands of the Fire Department of the authority necessary for effective fire prevention. It now begs to call to your attention the recommendations upon that point contained in the last report made to you by the Fire Commissioner. Commissioner Waldo advocates a Bureau of Fire Prevention which shall be clothed with all the functions and powers as to fire prevention which are now distributed among the several bureaus named, and the conferring upon such bureau of any additional powers necessary to enable it summarily to enforce the provisions of law.

Such a Bureau would have for its fundamental purpose the maintenance of constant and thorough inspection of all premises, with a view to compelling the abolition of dangerous conditions, the installation and maintenance of automatic and other appliances for the prompt extinction of fires in their incipency, and the provision and maintenance of adequate exits and fire escapes, and possibly the

enforcement of fire drills by employees.

Without constant and comprehensive inspection, the proper enforcement of existing laws and ordinances is impossible. The present system of dividing the jurisdiction among several agencies results in an infrequent and only partial inspection and spasmodic and uncertain enforcement. None of the City Departments having to do with this subject is equipped with an adequate force of Inspectors, and none of them has the summary powers of enforcement necessary to maintain proper conditions. The remedy, we repeat, is to be found in a consolidation of the proposed functions within the Fire Department and the creation therein of machinery adequate to maintain constant and vigilant supervision.

This Association has hitherto repeatedly urged upon Committees of the Legislature and upon City officials the necessity and desirability of such a Bureau of Fire Prevention. It emphatically endorses the views in relation thereto expressed by Commissioner Waldo, and it respectfully requests that you as Mayor urge upon the Legislature the necessity of enacting the legislation necessary for the creation of the desired Bureau. There are now pending before the Legislature two drafts of a proposed new Charter for this City, in which the subject of Fire Prevention is adequately treated by providing for the creation of such a Bureau as that outlined. In view, however, of the possible failure of legislation on the City Charter during the present session, this Association urges that a separate amendment to the present City Charter be prepared and introduced, in order that the effective Bureau of Fire Prevention advocated by Commissioner Waldo, and strongly urged during three years past by this Association, may be provided for by immediate legislation.

Very truly yours,
THE MERCHANTS' ASSOCIATION OF NEW YORK,

By *Henry R. Towne*, President.