

Wired Warrior – Bill O’Keeffe’s passionate quest to rid the country of wired glass – U.S. Glass Magazine



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Wired Warrior

Bill O’Keeffe’s passionate quest to rid the country of wired glass generates controversy

Bill O’Keeffe has dedicated himself to keeping wired glass from being used in unsafe applications such as schools and gymnasiums.

Hero or goat?

Champion crusader or rabble-rousing renegade?

Moralist or mercenary?

Quixote or quack?

Depending on whom you talk to, Bill O’Keeffe is one or the other.

O’Keeffe, the president of O’Keeffe’s Inc. in San Francisco has been leading what has become an impassioned fight against the use of wired glass in this country for more than 20 years.



During that time, he’s been labeled as a hero by organizations as diverse as consumer safety groups to some state legislators. Yet critics have called his motives into serious question, saying O’Keeffe’s crusade is simply a well-disguised attempt to use the building code process to gain market share for his company’s fire-rated non-wired glass products.

The Battle

If there is anything upon which both sides agree, it is that what is usually a civil disagreement before code-writing organizations has become a particularly nasty, personal and public all-out war between the two. And it is a debate that continues even today (see related articles on page 57).

“I’m a little perplexed as to how I got pushed down this road,” said O’Keeffe in an interview in his offices in mid-December. “I know that people say money is behind it, but that isn’t what pushes me. If it was, I would have given up a long time ago because it has cost me way more than I could ever recoup. I am almost worn out from the issue, which is, I guess, what the other side wanted. Contrary to what you might think, it’s not an emotional issue for me. The logic of it evades me. I just can’t understand the logic.”

O’Keeffe explained the history of how he entered the debate. “Our company has always been heavily involved in skylights and in the early 1970s I was asked by AAMA to represent them, in front of the code body, in their effort to maintain the use of tempered glass in skylight applications,” said O’Keeffe. “AAMA asked me to go and fight for the skylight industry, as there was no injury data supporting the problems with the use of tempered glass in skylights. I testified and we had a momentary victory, but tempered glass usage in skylights was eliminated so only wired or laminated glass could be used due to safety ‘concerns,’ not injury data. This change caused the price of skylight glass to go from \$5 to \$20. I guess this was great for the skylight manufacturers and good for the skylight industry. However I felt it was uncalled for, as there was no injury data to support the need for change.

“In the early 1980s a different issue, but with some similarities, came up when we started looking at different fire-rated alternatives. Firelite (Technical Glass Products’ [TGP] first non-wired, fire-rated product) was being used in hazardous locations. We looked at Firelite and we looked at wired glass with regard to compliance with safety. In that regard we began doing testing,” continued O’Keeffe. “We

found Firelite could not even meet the lower ANSI impact tests, and wired glass was breaking before Firelite. At that time TGP was telling customers that Firelite ... was a ceramic not regulated by the CPSC. So we questioned the CPSC [the federal agency that regulates the use of glass in hazardous locations]. CPSC told us that it was true. Firelite was not actually a glass, but a ceramic, so it wasn't subject to CPSC impact requirements [it is subject to the building codes however, which do require it to meet CPSC standards]. It seemed like a runaround to me. If it looks like a duck and walks like a duck. It is a duck," said O'Keefe. "Anyway," he continued, "there was no way wired glass could claim it was a 'ceramic' and it was breaking with much less force than Firelite. So I said to myself 'look we went through this big battle over safety in skylights when there really wasn't an issue and here we have a real issue. People are getting hurt and these are serious injuries.' It seemed extremely logical to get involved."



Company Background

O'Keefe's namesake company makes a variety of products including many types of skylights, ladders, ladder safety climb, ornamental metal work, storefront /curtainwall, smoke /fire vents and roof hatches. The 60-year old company also owns a division called Safety and Fire-rated Technology International (SAFTI) that manufactures and sells nine different types of fire-rated glazing products. While the company is headquartered in San Francisco, its main manufacturing offices are in Merced, Calif. It has 25 sales representatives throughout the world, all led by vice president of sales Mike Vizcarra.

"I've known Bill for many years," says Vizcarra, "and this is a righteous cause for him. It would have been easier for him to have walked away, many times, but he keeps at it on principle."

"He's lost more than he could possibly gain through this," says Kate Steel, O'Keefe's lobbyist before code groups. "But he really believes in the cause."

SAFTI accounts for approximately 50 percent of the company's sales. Critics (none of whom would speak on the record) say O'Keefe's campaign against wired glass is tied to this fact, as his company stands to benefit from its abolition. They also cite a lack of injury data and the extensive use of wired glass in Europe as evidence that a problem doesn't exist.

O'Keefe says that getting emergency rooms to keep track of glass injuries is routine, but getting that reporting mechanism to distinguish between wired glass and other glass injuries is impossible. "I have seen enough people have their lives changed by wired glass. We know there are people being hurt with serious injuries involved. And people think it's safe because it looks safe," he said.

The wired glass lobby says O'Keefe's statistics are fundamentally flawed, as they do not distinguish between wired glass installed before existing regulations took place, and that most injuries happen with glass installed in violation of the existing codes. They further charge that O'Keefe's continues to play an "emotional trump card" by parading victims of wired glass injuries by code officials.

One such person is Jarred Abel, a 22-year old athlete who was playing basketball at a University of Oregon gym in Eugene, Ore. Abel was severely injured by a fall through wired glass. He and his father, Greg, have formed Advocates for Safe Glass, an organization designed to help educate consumers about the danger of wired glass. Their efforts have caught the attention of Oregon State Representative Vicki Walker, who is supporting a code change submitted to the state's Structural Code Committee that would keep wired glass from being used in unsafe applications (see sidebar on page 55).

O'Keefe says the news report about this, along with other incidents, provided the impetus that recently led the wired glass manufacturers to recommend that the code bodies eliminate their exemption for wired glass in educational institutions (K-12) and to eliminate it in athletic facilities. It has also led to other small victories, such as the State of Utah's Division of Risk Management's notification to replace wired glass in high schools. "We urge you to evaluate your old buildings and prioritize the replacement of wired glass," said Margaret Sidwell in the division's September 2001 newsletter. "We realize this is expensive, but doing so may make the difference in preventing injury to a young athlete or student."

What's to Come?

Will the elimination of the exemption in certain cases mark the end to O'Keefe's quest? Maybe.

" I think I'll wait and see what ANSI does and I think the public person on this issue will soon become Greg Abel. That's appropriate, as he will be working on the elimination of wired glass where kids can go through it and that was a big concern. It's been a long and uphill road but it is my belief the glass industry will be better for it by providing safety and I'm ready to move on.

Bill O'Keeffe isn't the only one working against the usage of wired glass. Oregon Rep. Vicki Walker is also pursuing efforts to keep wired glass from being used in certain buildings in Oregon. Advocates for Safe Glass, the organization started by Greg Abel, the father of Jarred Abel, who was injured in a wired glass accident, has submitted a code change that would affect the Oregon State Structural Code. According to Walker the proposed code change was submitted to the Structural Code Committee and is for new construction only. "The committee will decide whether this issue is a life safety issue, which then allows it to move forward on recommendations and changes to the new code now, rather than waiting for the entire code to be reviewed and revised, which is not expected until 2005 at the earliest," said Walker.

The Oregon Building Code division will make a recommendation to the Structural Code Committee that the submittal is a life safety issue, and ask them to move forward with the hearing process, said Walker. If proceedings move as expected by Walker and the Advocates for Safe Glass, the new code change will be implemented in April 2003.

"Should we fail in our efforts at administrative changes, I would look to the legislature to make the necessary change," said Walker. "However, I am confident we have the support of the department and will be successful in our efforts at the administrative level."

In the next legislative session (which will be in 2003), Walker plans to introduce legislation that applies to existing buildings with wired glass.