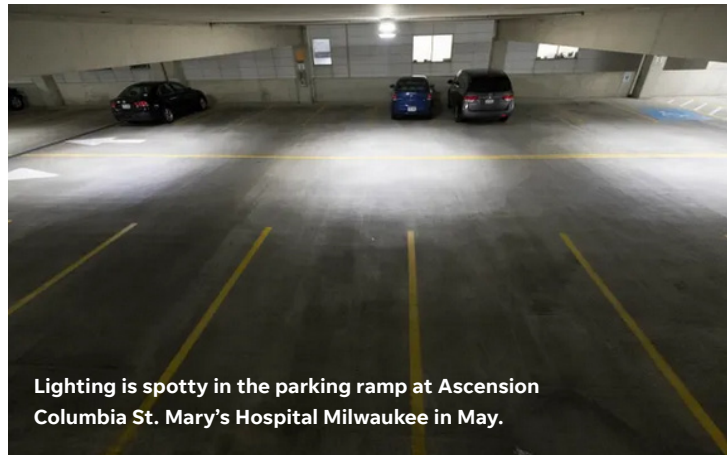


In the Shadows



City moves to tackle risks of garages with poor lighting

By Raquel Rutledge, Milwaukee Journal Sentinel

Dimly lit parking garages are not merely a backdrop for scary movie scenes.

The darkness is real in parking structures across the country. And so are the crimes and dangers that come with it.

For decades this has been the case, even as recent data from the FBI show parking garages — at hospitals, hotels or downtown offices — are

the third most common site of homicides, assaults and other serious crimes.

Why has the darkness prevailed?

One of the answers is buried deep within obscure international building code guidelines, in a section that addresses whether buildings are “occupied.” Even though hundreds of people may use parking

structures 24/7, they are classified as “storage” space.

Other answers play out in how seriously regulators, legislators and parking garage owners take the responsibility of providing safe space for visitors and employees who use the structures.

In Milwaukee, at least two aldermen hope to tackle the issue at the municipal level where lighting plans are implemented without review by regulators and where authorities say they now have limited ability to enforce parking area codes.

A Milwaukee Journal Sentinel investigation published last month revealed how hospitals, in particular, across the country fail to adequately protect employees from violence in parking garages, opting not to monitor cameras, improve lighting and patrols, or offer employees practical escorts to their cars during round-the-clock shifts.

Last year, nurse practitioner Carlie Beaudin was beaten to death in a parking garage at Froedtert Hospital in Wauwatosa after finishing her shift.

Just last week, a doctor in Edina, Minnesota was shot in the head in a robbery attempt in the parking garage of the hospital where he worked.

The Journal Sentinel hired a security consultant to assess eight parking structures at five hospitals around Milwaukee.

The consultant’s spot checks found serious security shortcomings and unsafe lighting at each location.

“If they don’t want to provide more lighting they can get out of the business,” said Ald. Bob Bauman referring to parking garage owners. “It boils down to economics. They would rather settle multimillion dollar lawsuits paid for substantially by insurance than incur increases in their day-to-day operating budget.”

Froedtert Hospital reached an out-of-court settlement in November with Nick Beaudin, Carlie’s husband of nine years, for an undisclosed sum.

Some security fixes in parking structures — from better lighting to having parking attendants on site and frequent patrols — could be mandated through licensing requirements, Bauman said.

In 2018, the Common Council passed legislation overhauling the licensing of downtown parking structures, requiring all owners to present a police-approved security plan and — if they have more than two security incidents per month — to implement additional security measures such as improved lighting, video surveillance and take other measures directed by the Milwaukee Police Department.

“The Medical College of Wisconsin could solve their

problem tomorrow: Hire 50 people to patrol the area on foot, on bikes on Segway, you name it,” Bauman said.

As for lighting, Bauman and Ald. Nik Kovac co-sponsored legislation introduced Tuesday to close loopholes that have led to confusion about the lighting requirements and could also mandate the city to begin pre-construction inspection of lighting plans, Kovac told the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel.

Mayor Tom Barrett is aware of the problems, according to his spokeswoman, Jodie Tabak. “As issues arise, we will respond appropriately,” Tabak said in an email response to the Journal Sentinel’s questions.

Confusion reigns

One reason authorities have trouble enforcing better lighting rules stems from a guideline in the International Building Code that cities often include in their own municipal codes. It classifies parking structures as “storage” facilities.

Some developers, planners and garage owners argue that means they don’t need to adhere to higher artificial lighting requirements for spaces used by people.

Occupied buildings should have an average of 10 foot-candles of light, throughout, according to the International Building Code. The

arcane-sounding foot-candle is the amount of light equivalent to what a candle would illuminate in a 1-square-foot area. The lighting level inside most large grocery stores, for example, measures about 30 foot-candles. Movie theaters register about 0.5 to 1 when darkened during screenings.

Other city regulators and some members of the International Code Council say that when you park your car in a structure and walk to and from a building you are occupying the structure and it needs to adhere to general interior lighting guidelines.

Still others, including planners in Milwaukee, say the issue isn’t as much about whether the structure is occupied, but has more to do with whether the structure is enclosed, such as the underground parking ramp where Beaudin was beaten to death.

Enclosed structures are interiors and need to meet the average 10 foot-candle standard, said David Rhodes, a building and construction inspection supervisor with the City of Milwaukee Department of Neighborhood Services.

During a spot check in May 2019, the consultant hired by the Journal Sentinel found light readings ranging from 4 to 6.5 foot candles in the area of the Froedtert Hospital garage where Beaudin was slain. Surveillance

video showed her killer was lurking around the hospital and garage for more than two hours before Beaudin went to her car after completing her shift around 1 a.m. — but no one was monitoring the cameras.

Rhodes said that “open” garages —those that have outside air between the floors — are not subject to interior, artificial lighting standards because they allow in natural light.

But what about at night?

As it stands there is nothing requiring open garages to have more than the 1-foot candle mandated in fire codes to find escape doors, even in the dark of night, he said.

“Right now we have codes which don’t bring you anywhere close to what you would want from a security standpoint,” he said.

‘It’s an emergency life saving device’

Kimberly Paarlberg, a senior architect with the International Code Council, emphasized that building codes are bare minimums. Designers and builders can — and often should — exceed the guidelines, she said.

“The guidelines are not geared toward protecting people from assault,” Paarlberg said. “The building code doesn’t assume that a bad guy is there.”

Codes aren’t the only

problem behind poor lighting. In Milwaukee, code enforcement supervisors say they’re not allowed to inspect parking garages for lighting levels or anything else — unless someone first files a complaint.

Unlike restaurants, which city officials inspect annually, the city doesn’t have the staff to inspect every garage, said Mike Mannan, manager of building code enforcement for commercial properties for the City of Milwaukee.

“Every inspection is like a search,” he said. “We can’t illegally search. We need a complaint.”

Thomas Smith, a security consultant for the healthcare industry, said safety really boils down to the priority choices made by parking structure owners. They often choose to spend more time and money on landscaping and aesthetics than on safe lighting and security, he said.

Every one of the hundreds of hospital parking structures Smith has assessed has a percentage of light bulbs burned out and blue-light emergency phones that aren’t working, he said.

“I always say, ‘Which one of you guys wouldn’t properly maintain your defibrillator device?’ That’s what this is,” he said.

“It’s an emergency life saving device.”