

# A Trip to the Trash Chute

by Chet Ribner

**I**s a trip to your building's trash rooms an unpleasant—and unhealthy—experience for your residents and staff? It doesn't have to be that way! Proper trash chute hygiene and maintenance is often overlooked until there is a fire violation, or a blockage in the chute. There are a growing number of progressive-thinking managers and/or boards who maintain their chutes on a regular basis, but the majority prefer to allocate funds for more physically appealing projects, such as landscaping.

However, a poorly maintained chute can result in a lot more than fire (or insurance) violations—it can result in “sick building” syndrome. What's that you say? Your main-

tenance team uses the cold-water washdown in the chute regularly? Well, here's our analogy: Think back to when you last cooked something particularly fatty or greasy. Maybe it was a frying pan of bacon, or a roasting pan. Chances are, you put the messy pan in the sink, and added lots of very hot water and detergent. After all, cold water isn't going to touch that greasy residue!

The same dynamics apply to your trash chute, except cold water will speed up the rusting process in the chute, reducing its useable life. Consider what goes into the chute on a daily basis—hundreds of pounds of discarded food, paper, and used toiletries. Some of the bags will open on their journey down to the dumpster. Others will leak, or tear. Every building has those special residents who don't even bag their trash. All of this falling debris leaves its

mark in the way of greasy, odorous sludge on the walls of the chute.

This sludge is a breeding ground for bacteria, and also a major source of food for roaches and rodents, who bring their own assortment of disease and germs with them. These unpleasant neighbors can cause respiratory ailments and allergies. Anyone unfortunate enough to cut themselves on a trash chute door, or to touch a door with an open wound on their hand, can end up with a bad infection.

The sludge build-up creates another hazard—it is highly combustible, as it contains grease. A small trash room fire can turn into a major conflagration, leaving residents homeless, if not hurt. The chute acts like a chimney, sucking flames and smoke upwards. Trash chute doors that don't self-close and self-latch allow the fire and smoke to escape into the corridors of the building, making the damage very much worse.

The most noticeable sign of a sick chute is odor—a signal that bacteria are present. So, how do you keep your chute healthy and safe—affordably? By working with a



reputable, licensed trash chute company. A professional cleaning system utilizes super-heated water (to cut through the grease); water-soluble chemicals; odor-counteractants, and special products to deter vermin. It will also use specially designed spinning heads with jets that blast the inside of the chute. This pressure, combined with super-heated water, is the most effective way to get the grime off the chute, and kill the bacteria. Professional technicians clean all the chute doors by hand, polishing the exterior, and tightening the hardware.

Depending on the size of the building, and the type of community (rentals, condo, year-round residents, etc), professional cleaning should be done at least once per year. In between cleanings, a system that keeps the chute smelling fresh is a good idea. One such system is a timed-release pump that continually "mists" the chute with cherry-scented odor controller. Whenever a resident opens a trash chute door to deposit their rubbish, they are met with the scent of fresh fruit rather than week-old, rotting garbage.

What about those pesky fire inspectors? Why do they inspect your trash chute? As mentioned earlier, the chute acts like a chimney, and the grease inside the chute is very flammable. So the trash chute system has to meet fire codes.

There are two defense systems in your trash chute. At the very bottom of the chute, there is a discharge (or guillotine) door. Fire codes require that this door be equipped with a UL-rated fusible link. In case of a fire in the trash room, the link will melt, allowing the discharge door to roll closed, sealing off the chute and stopping the deadly ascent of fire and smoke. Many fire inspectors—and more and more insurance inspectors—cite a building for not having a fusible link. But that is only one part of the door's ability to function properly. If the door is rusted, or bent, it still will not close.

Good chute maintenance includes inspecting the discharge door twice per year, servicing it to remove rust, and lubricating it to ensure smooth operations. If the door does have to be replaced, most sizes, installed, are under \$700. That is truly a small price to pay for a key component of your building's fire safety systems.

The second component of the chute's fire safety is the trash chute doors on each floor. These doors have to be UL-rated for at least one-and-a-half hours. They must self-latch and self-close. This prevents smoke and flames from escaping out of the chute onto residential floors.

Thankfully, trash chute fires are not an everyday occurrence! But maintaining your chute doors is important for reasons other than fire safety. Doors that don't shut properly allow odors—and those charming little "critters"—to escape out of the chute. Improperly-maintained doors that do not have hydraulic closers can fall open, and can also "snap" shut very quickly. This can injure a resident or staff member. Doors that don't latch are easily opened by small children, who may be tempted to slide down the chute—yes, it has happened!—or just "take a peep" down it, then lose their balance.

Many maintenance people, working with a tight budget, attempt to repair trash chute doors on their own. They often use alternative parts that they purchase at a hardware store. Unfortunately, using incorrect parts often requires them to drill into the door, which, in turn, destroys the fire-rated integrity of the door. A lot of older buildings

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still have their original doors in place, which were fabricated from aluminum. These are not fire-rated doors, and need to be replaced.

These are just some of the reasons why a condominium should have an amount designated in their budget for trash chute maintenance. Regular cleanings with hot water, and a pro-active approach to repairs, will keep your chute healthy, and extend its useable life.

Florida's humidity, and proximity to the ocean, are brutal on all metal. Sooner or later, your chute will need to be replaced. When the metal rusts away, and holes develop in the chute, garbage gets between the chute and the wall of the chase. Then there is no way to clean and sanitize the chute, and either partial or full replacement is required. More and more properties are opting to spend a little more money for 300-Series Stainless Steel chute systems (rather than aluminized steel). The extended life of the stainless steel makes it a very worthwhile investment.

Unfortunately, if the chute is not being inspected and maintained, you don't realize there is a problem with rust until you start getting blockages in the chute—or sections of the chute actually collapse. Then the board is in the unpleasant position of having to do major repairs that are not in the budget. Quite often the chute has to be closed down while permits are being obtained and materials custom-fabricated. This guarantees you a building full of bad odors and unhappy residents! And it can so easily be avoided with a little planning.

What should you look for in a trash chute company? Liability and Workman's Compensation insurance is a must. Do you really want an uninsured company pumping hundreds of gallons of water up into the trash chute of your building? Or welding in your chute? You should also be sure that the insurance covers the type of work that the company is doing. Your property and your residents will not be covered if your local car detailer decides he is a chute cleaner. If all of his insurances are based on his car detailing business, he is NOT covered to clean and repair trash chutes.

Another important credential is a State Sheet Metal Contractor's license. This is required to work on the chute itself, and to pull permits for chute repairs and replacement when necessary.

Always get written estimates with detailed descriptions of the work to be done, and compare "apples to apples." Is the chute going to be cleaned with hot water? How hot? Are replacement parts and doors going to be brand new, or reconditioned? What is the warranty on the job? If it's for a deodorizer system, is there a chemical data sheet for the product being used? If not, how can you be sure it's not just colored scented water?

So, to ensure that your residents' visits to the trash room don't become scenes from a "B" rated horror movie, take a few simple steps to maintain a healthy chute:

- Budget for regular professional cleaning and maintenance of the trash chute
  - Stop using your cold water wash down system
  - Have a bi-annual inspection of the entire trash chute system by a licensed professional
  - Consider installing a time-release odor control system
- Chet Ribner is owner of Southern Chute, Inc., in Davie, FL. ■*



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