

High-Rise Escape Device Praised In Israel, Thwarted In NY

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NEW YORK -- The idea emerged after Jonathan "Yoni" Shimshoni and a team of aspiring inventors in Israel watched a television documentary detailing the heart-wrenching plight of victims trapped on the upper floors of the World Trade Center on Sept. 11, 2001.

Shimshoni recalled seeing the towering inferno and thinking, "This is nuts. This shouldn't have to happen." The team came up with a potentially lifesaving solution: a \$1 million escape device with expandable cabins that could be lowered like lifeboats outside a high-rise in distress. A prototype tested in Tel Aviv won praise from politicians, public safety experts and the landlord of a midtown Manhattan skyscraper who offered his property for a pilot program.

That was before Shimshoni received a discouraging letter dated Feb. 6 from the city's Office of Emergency Management. In short, he was told the project was unworthy of the necessary building permits.

The decision was a blow to Shimshoni's company, Escape Rescue Systems. But the CEO -- a 55-year-old former Israeli military officer with a public policy doctorate from Princeton University -- insists it wasn't fatal.

"If there's anyplace that should revolutionize high-rise safety, it's New York City," he said recently at his Manhattan office, inside a 30-floor building where he still hopes to try out the system.

Shimshoni believes public opinion and political pull could change the city's position.

Last year, the company polled 600 New Yorkers who live or work above the 11th floor. It says 92 percent wanted to see some sort of emergency evacuation system besides stairways or fire escapes installed in their buildings. Shimshoni also has the backing of handicapped advocacy groups which believe his system would improve the chances of survival for disabled people. And he's received letters of endorsement from city council members, including Yvette Clarke, who chairs the council committee on fire services and checked out the prototype on a trip to Israel.

"I personally rode on the system and was amazed," Clarke wrote.

The company's Web site features a video shot in Tel Aviv during a demonstration of the device. It shows the system being lowered with cables from a rooftop crane. Once on the street, it expands to form five cabins that, like an external elevator, lift firefighters back up the side of the building, where they help evacuees out through windows.

Each cabin can hold up to 30 people, meaning 150 people can be evacuated during eight-minute deployment cycles -- a remedy Shimshoni says would minimize tragedy in a building crippled by a major fire or terrorist attack.

At the World Trade Center, the system "probably would have saved hundreds of lives," he said.

The letter from OEM commissioner Joseph Bruno said the city is open to "exploring creative solutions" for high-rise evacuations. But, he added, an analysis by fire, police and building officials raised too many concerns about Shimshoni's system.

Among the city's concerns: that there would be confusion over who would operate the system during an emergency; that using windows as escape routes can help a fire spread; that passengers of the cabins risk passing floors immersed in flames; and that the system was prone to the Titanic effect -- chaos over who would be first in line for a limited number of spots in each cabin.

The city has "legitimate concerns," Shimshoni said. "If you want to be sure how to address them, there should be a pilot program."

Shimshoni concedes other U.S. cities might be more welcoming. However, New York, with its soaring skyline and history of terrorist attacks, makes more sense, he said.

"I'm very optimistic this will work out here," he said.

