Caution urged in use of candles

By Noah Haglund, Everett Herald Writer

A leading cause of house fires has stayed constant from ancient history into the digital age. Candles start fires here in Snohomish County almost every year. One of the worst was an October 2011 blaze at downtown Everett’s Strand Hotel, which displaced more than two dozen people.

Locally, as elsewhere, candle fires occur more often when the weather cools off, particularly during the holidays.

“Normally, people bring them out for the holiday season,” Everett Fire Marshal Rick Robinson said. “We don’t discourage the use of candles, but we do discourage the unsupervised use of candles. If people have a live flame in a room, that flame shouldn’t be left unattended.” In other words, put out the candles in the rest of the house before sitting down at the dining-room table.

Candle fires are statistically most common in December, the National Fire Protection Association reports. The top five days are holidays: Christmas, Christmas Eve, New Year’s Day, New Year’s Eve and Halloween.

Fire-safety experts estimate that candles start 15,600 house fires in the United States every year, resulting in 150 deaths, 1,270 injuries and more than $500 million in property damage. More than a third of those fires started in a bedroom. Someone falling asleep was believed to be a factor in at least a quarter of the fatalities.

In Snohomish County, candles were blamed for starting a house fire in the Meadowdale area in 2012, another in Everett’s Delta neighborhood in 2011 and another in the Martha Lake neighborhood near Lynnwood on Christmas Day 2010. That latter fire also sent a man to the hospital.

In October of 2010, a candle started a fire in the basement of a Mukilteo home, sending two people to the hospital.

In the late 1990s, a blaze consumed a south Everett home after a dog knocked a candle off of a coffee table, igniting a sofa, Robinson said.

“Sometimes, that happy dog with a wagging tale can knock a candle off a table,” he said. Candles should always be placed up high enough that young children and pets can’t get to them. Watch cats who like to cruise on top of furniture – they can knock over a candle.

Candles are just one reason for an increase in fires between Halloween and New Year’s Day, when distractions abound for adults and children tend to be home on break. Incidents while deep-frying turkeys often occur around Thanksgiving. Never try to deep-fry a turkey inside any structure (house, garage, shed).
At any time of year, most fires start while cooking or from heating equipment. Cigarettes and other smoking materials cause the most deaths.

**Tips for avoiding candle fires:**
- Extinguish all candles when leaving the room or going to sleep.
- Keep candles at least one foot away from things that can catch fire, such as clothing, books or curtains.
- Use sturdy candle holders that won't tip over easily.
- Place candles up high enough that small children or pets can't knock them over.
- Don't burn a candle all the way down — put it out before it gets too close to the holder or container.
- Place candle holders on top of a ceramic plate or some other non-flammable material.
- Make sure your smoke detectors work and replace batteries every six months.
- Have flashlights and battery-powered lighting ready to use during a power outage. Never use candles.
- Consider using electric candles.

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