RFMA Restaurant Facility Management Association

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It's That Time of Year Protect your restaurant against frozen pipes

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Jackets and chilly breezes serve as a reminder to get busy preparing your facility's plumbing for the cold, snow and ice that are just around the corner. When winter arrives, it can be sudden— often leaving restaurant managers unprepared for the plumbing troubles associated with extreme weather conditions.

A few simple preparations could prevent headaches and costly repairs caused by a freezing or bursting water pipe. Repairing the broken pipe itself is a relatively minor chore, but the collateral damage caused by the resulting leak could mean thousands of dollars for major reconstruction or maybe even replacing equipment and furnishings.

Here are some steps you can take to protect your restaurant against frozen pipes:

If your building is equipped with interior shut-off valves leading to outside fixtures, close the valves for the season and drain the lines before cold temperatures arrive.

Drain outside fountains and sprinklers, and disconnect pipes from faucets to prevent ice blockages from forming.

Implement seasonal drain-down procedures in the fall for all unheated areas.

For outside faucets or fixtures, make sure they aren't dripping or leaking. Make the necessary repairs before freezing temperatures arrive.

Keep the thermostat set no lower than 55 degrees Fahrenheit to prevent pipes from freezing.

Identify water pipes that could freeze, such as those running through unheated crawl spaces or close to outside walls. A hot water pipe can freeze just as easily as a cold water pipe, so pay attention to both. These pipes need insulation as much as your exterior walls do. Un-insulated pipes can freeze and burst in unheated mechanical rooms as well as above unheated ceilings. In addition, un-insulated pipes can make your water heater work overtime, increasing energy costs. Wrap pipes with fiberglass insulation and tape or wrap pre-formed pipe sleeve insulation along the pipes and tape the sleeves in place. Rockwool can be used between the pipe and the wall to help keep the cold away from the pipe.

For restaurants facing extremely harsh winters or those with a history of specific pipes freezing, consider adhering heat tape to your pipes. If your pipes are plastic, use only automatic, thermostatically controlled heat tape. Make sure to periodically inspect these pipes for damage and for fraying tape that needs to be replaced.

Identify and seal any cracks or splits in walls, doors and window frames located near pipes. Even a small crack or hole can allow enough cold air inside to freeze nearby pipes. Once a pipe freezes, even a tiny split can unleash 250 gallons of water per day from a pressurized water supply line.

If cold weather catches you off guard, a short-term solution is to leave a small stream of water running, since flowing water will not freeze as quickly.

Many plumbing companies offer winterizing services, and often there's no substitute for a professional plumber, especially if you don't have the time or the inclination to undertake the project on your own. But with a little determination, some common sense and a plan of attack, these preparations can be completed quickly and easily.

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