Proprietary vs Non-Proprietary Fire Detection Systems: What Strata Committees Need to Know

When a strata building is considering a fire detection system replacement, significant modification, or the selection of a new fire detection platform, one of the most important questions is often one that nobody thinks to ask:

"Is the proposed system proprietary or non-proprietary?"

The answer can affect who can maintain the system, who can supply parts, how future system changes are managed and what the building may pay over the life of the system.

For many owners corporations, this distinction only becomes apparent years later when faults occur, spare parts become difficult to obtain or a major system replacement is required.

It is also important to understand that proprietary and non-proprietary systems are different from the conventional versus addressable discussion. A system can be conventional or addressable while also being proprietary or non-proprietary. These are separate considerations that affect different aspects of ownership, maintenance and future system management.

What is a proprietary fire detection system?

A proprietary fire detection system is one where the manufacturer maintains a high degree of control over the equipment, software, programming or servicing requirements.

Depending on the system, this may mean:

- Specialised programming software
- Restricted access to configuration tools
- Manufacturer-approved service providers
- Limited access to spare parts
- Dependence on specific suppliers

In some cases, only authorised providers can make significant changes to the system.

What is a non-proprietary fire detection system?

A non-proprietary system is generally designed so that qualified fire contractors can access the programming, configuration and maintenance tools required to support the system.

This typically provides:

- Greater contractor choice
- Competitive maintenance pricing
- Easier access to replacement parts
- More flexibility for future modifications and expansion
- Reduced dependence on a single provider

The building owner retains greater control over who services and modifies the system.

Why does this matter?

When a system is first installed, both proprietary and non-proprietary solutions may appear similar. The differences often become more noticeable years later.

For example, imagine a building decides to change maintenance providers. With some systems, the transition may be relatively straightforward. With others, access to software, programming information, passwords or specialised components may limit the available options or require ongoing involvement from specific suppliers.

This can affect:

- Maintenance pricing
- Replacement costs
- Response times
- Availability of contractors
- Long-term system flexibility

Does proprietary mean bad?

No.

Many highly regarded fire detection systems have proprietary elements.

Proprietary systems can offer:

- Strong manufacturer support
- Robust product development
- Consistent system architecture
- Advanced functionality
- Established supply chains

The issue is not whether a system is proprietary.

The issue is whether the owners corporation understands the implications before making a long-term investment.

Questions strata committees should ask

Before approving a new fire detection system, committees should ask:

Who can service this system?

Can any suitably qualified contractor maintain the system, or are there restrictions?

Who can program the system?

Will the building be dependent on a specific provider for future modifications?

How accessible are spare parts?

What happens if components fail five, ten or fifteen years from now?

Can another contractor take over the system?

If the building wants to change providers in the future, how difficult will that be?

What happens if the manufacturer withdraws support?

What is the long-term support and replacement pathway?

Why this matters when selecting a system

When a building replaces an obsolete fire detection system, it is making a decision that may affect the next 15–25 years.

The initial installation cost is only one consideration.

Committees should also think about:

- Future maintenance costs
- Contractor competition
- System flexibility
- Long-term support availability
- Availability of replacement parts
- Dependence on particular suppliers or service providers

A system that appears less expensive today may create constraints later if the building becomes dependent on a limited number of providers.

The importance of future-proofing

Many of the fire detection replacement projects being undertaken today involve systems that were installed decades ago. At the time, nobody expected spare parts to become unavailable or manufacturers to discontinue product lines.

While nobody can predict the future, committees can improve their position by considering:

- Availability of support
- Manufacturer longevity
- Long-term support pathways
- Contractor choice
- System openness

before making a decision.

Questions to ask before approving a proposal

Before selecting a new fire detection system, ask:

1. Is this system proprietary or non-proprietary?
2. Who can service and program it?
3. Can another contractor maintain it in the future?
4. Are programming tools widely available?
5. How easy is it to expand the system?
6. What happens if components become obsolete?
7. What is the manufacturer's support strategy?
8. What options will be available when the system eventually reaches end of life?
9. Will the owners corporation retain flexibility?
10. What are the long-term ownership implications?

Final thoughts

Choosing a fire detection system is not simply about selecting a panel and detectors.

It is also about selecting a platform that the building may rely on for decades.

Understanding the difference between proprietary and non-proprietary systems helps owners corporations make informed decisions about maintenance, replacement planning, contractor choice and long-term ownership costs.

Before approving any major fire detection system replacement or modification, strata committees should ensure they understand not only the installation cost, but also the long-term implications of the system they are selecting.

Full Circle Fire specialises in fire detection and alarm systems, including the maintenance, repair and replacement of ageing and obsolete equipment, as well as fire detection system works arising from Fire Safety Orders.