Warwick battery fire a successful test of N.Y.'s safety code

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When a lithium-ion battery energy storage system in Warwick, Orange County, experienced a fire in late December, fire protection safety systems performed exactly as they were designed to do. The incident resulted in the loss of limited, replaceable equipment — and nothing more. There were no injuries, no evacuations, no fire that spread beyond the affected equipment, and no impact to public safety or air quality. Firefighters brought the incident under control within hours, demonstrating that the safeguards built into New York's fire code worked in real-world conditions.

In other words, the Warwick incident was a failure of equipment, not of safety systems. It was a controlled event, handled exactly as New York's fire safety code is designed to ensure. In the world of energy infrastructure and fire protection, that outcome has a name: "a successful failure."

Battery energy storage systems behave differently from conventional fires. When a lithium-ion battery experiences thermal runaway, the chemical reaction can generate heat and gases that are not easily extinguished with water. Fire service professionals across the country have learned that aggressive suppression is not always the safest approach. Instead, containment, isolation and air monitoring are the most effective ways to protect public health and the surrounding communities — and, for outdoor cabinet-style systems where life hazards are limited or non-existent, a defensive operational posture is widely considered best practice.

New York's fire safety code reflects these realities. After earlier battery storage incidents, the state undertook a two-year collaborative process involving state agencies, independent safety experts and the fire safety community. Fire safety leaders, including the FDNY, played a central role in shaping these standards and have publicly supported the resulting code as a practical, real-world framework that aligns with how battery fires are managed on the ground.

Warwick provided a real-world test of New York's safety framework, and it passed. First responders followed proven procedures, the fire was contained to the affected equipment, and air monitoring confirmed there was no public health risks identified.

No safety code is designed to eliminate the possibility of equipment failure. What it can do is ensure that when failures occur, they do not escalate into disasters. The absence of injuries, evacuations, or broader environmental harm is not accidental. It is the outcome of deliberate planning.

Battery energy storage is essential infrastructure for New York's electric grid. It supports reliability during peak demand, reduces dependence on fossil fuel peaker plants, and allows energy to be stored and used when it is needed most. As New York electrifies buildings and transportation, storage will only become more critical to stabilizing energy costs and supporting a resilient, reliable power grid.

Public confidence matters. That confidence is built not by pretending risks do not exist, but by demonstrating that risks are understood, regulated and managed responsibly. Transparency after incidents, clear communication and continued refinement of safety standards are all part of that responsibility. Every day in America, nearly 3,800 fires break out — from homes and vehicles to brush and trash. These incidents are a routine part of emergency response, managed with established tools and protocols by trained professionals.

The Warwick incident should be viewed through that lens. It was not a sign that New York's approach to battery safety is failing. It was evidence that the state's fire code and emergency response protocols are working as intended, even under challenging conditions.

Equally important, New Yorkers deserve to understand why battery energy storage is essential infrastructure. Rising energy demand means we need every tool available to maintain a reliable, resilient grid.

We should continue to learn from every incident and improve as technology evolves. But we should also recognize success when safety systems perform their most important function: protecting people and communities when something goes wrong.

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