

SQUARE FOOTAGE

Home builders group to fight sprinkler system

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The Michigan Association of Home Builders is gearing up to fight an effort that would require automatic sprinkling systems in all new single-family houses, claiming that the measure will drive up costs several thousands of dollars.

The move came from the National Fire Protection Association, which revised its Life Safety Code to include an automatic sprinkler system requirement as a way to prevent the deaths of an average 4,000 people per year nationally.

The requirement will be the subject of a public hearing hosted by the International Codes Council in November in Michigan. Members of the council have twice voted to include the sprinkler requirement in the appendix of the International Code, said Lee Schwartz, the Michigan association's executive vice president of government relations.

"I think it is unwarranted," Schwartz said. "There is no justification for that, statistically or practically. When homeowners have been offered the systems as an option, they don't want them."

But the fire protection association believes automatic sprinkling systems will save lives if built into new single-family homes and condominiums. That's a point that Schwartz and Jim Babcock, president of the Building Industry Association of Southeastern Michigan, are willing to dispute.

"Sprinkling systems save buildings. They aren't going to save lives," said Babcock, of Babcock Building Co. in St. Clair Shores.

Schwartz said the expense — an average \$3,000-\$4,000 if hooked to a public water line — isn't worth what he believes is an incremental boost in safety. Required smoke alarms save far more lives, he said.

In 2004, there were 94 deaths in house fires in Michigan. Only 15 of those cases had working smoke alarms. In 2003, of the 115 deaths, only 20 had working smoke alarms, and in 2002 of the 112 deaths, only 21 had working detectors, said Schwartz, referring to Michigan Bureau of Fire Services statistics.

Schwartz and Babcock said the sprinkler requirement could price some people out of the housing market, especially first-time buyers in entry-level-priced homes.

Then there is the practical side to the proposal. In rural areas, for example, Schwartz estimated a sprinkling system could cost an additional \$3,000-\$4,000 over the average estimate, because of the

distance between water lines.

If a balcony requires sprinkling, a water line would have to be extended outside, meaning something will be required to prevent it from freezing.

Also, Babcock said builders will need to hire special contractors to

install a sprinkler system, adding more costs to a house.

"This is just not cost effective," he said.

■ *Joanne Maliszewski covers real estate for Oakland Business Review.*

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Building Industry Association of Southeastern Michigan



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