

Burlington County Times

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Delay on fire code is all wet

In July 2000, former Gov. Christie Whitman signed the Sprinkler Act, which requires that fire sprinkler systems be installed in all private school and college dormitories in the state. The law was enacted in response to the tragic loss of three Seton Hall University students in a dorm fire less than six months before.

We wonder what kind of tragedy it will take to inspire Gov. Chris Christie to approve the 2009 International Fire Code, which contains a requirement making it mandatory for all newly constructed one- and two-family homes and townhomes built in the state after Jan. 1, 2012, to contain a fire sprinkler system.

Christie has on his desk an opportunity to save lives by approving the code by the Sept. 8 deadline.

Since June 21, nine New Jersey residents have died in five residential fires. It's pretty simple, really. Residential sprinklers could have saved those lives.

Officials in Prince George's County, Md., adopted a similar requirement in 1992. In a study conducted jointly by the Maryland State Fire Marshal's Office, the University of Maryland, the Prince George's County Fire Department, and the Home Fire Sprinkler Coalition, from 1992 to 2007 there were 101 fire deaths and 328 civilian injuries in single-family or townhouse fires that were not protected with fire sprinkler systems. There were no deaths in sprinklered-structure fires during that same time period - none - and only six civilian injuries.

And the folks who should know, including members of the New Jersey Uniform Construction Code Advisory Board, New Jersey Fire Sprinkler Advisory Board, New Jersey Fire Sprinkler Association, the state Department of Community Affairs and Christie's own Red Tape Review commission, have vetted and approved the 2009 IRC Code.

What's not to like? The requirement will save lives and millions of dollars in property damage, and it won't cost the state a penny.

Builders don't like the requirement because sprinklers will add to the cost of constructing a home. And it will - the national average cost to install a fire sprinkler system in new construction is about \$1.61 per square foot or about 1 percent of the total home price, and it will probably be a bit higher in New Jersey. For the purchaser of an average 2,000-square-foot home, it would add less than \$4,000 to his or her costs. Compared with the cost of repairs and cleanup after even a minor house fire, it is well worth it. Upgrades, such as granite countertops or a finished basement, will cost a buyer more.

In addition to peace of mind, a home sprinkler system will give an owner a discount on homeowner's insurance premiums, and in the event of a fire, the sprinkler system will limit damage to a small area.

While newer construction materials are often stronger, safer and easier to work with than their organic predecessors, they can burn faster. One sprinkler head (they don't all go off - just the ones nearest intense heat) can extinguish a fire within minutes - often before firefighters arrive - saving lives and limiting damage.



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And in this era of municipal economies, equipping newly constructed houses with fire sprinkler systems will take the strain off local, often volunteer, fire services.

Residential sprinklers require no maintenance. And forget about the ugly gun-metal gray sprinkler heads of the past. They are smaller with flat covers that allow them to lie flush with the wall or ceiling. And the covers can be matched to any paint color.

We don't know why the governor has decided to put this issue on the back burner. Frankly, that doesn't really matter right now. What matters is that this is an opportunity to avoid future tragedies, and if the governor doesn't act by Sept. 8, it will have been wasted. We urge the governor to adopt the code that requires sprinkler systems in new residential construction.

