

THURSDAY, APRIL 22, 2010

No red tape in N.J. fire sprinkler rule

In making its recommendations Monday, Gov. Christie's red-tape review panel had the good sense not to halt implementation of a rule requiring new homes to have fire sprinkler systems in New Jersey.

The life-saving regulation was one of dozens temporarily stayed during a 90-day review conducted by a panel chaired by Lt. Governor Kim Guadagno. The panel gave the go-ahead for implementing the requirement for sprinklers in newly-constructed one- and two-family dwellings, effective in January 2012.

Since the review wasn't supposed to stall any rule that had public-safety implications, it was pretty clear from the start that the sprinkler regulation – putting New Jersey in the forefront nationally – shouldn't be delayed. Lives could be at stake.



N.J. Governor Chris Christie (left) and Lt. Governor Kim Guadagno at a recent visit to Moorestown. (David M Warren / Staff Photographer)

With lightweight construction materials in today's new homes, fire safety experts warn that smoke detectors may not provide enough warning when these fast-burning structures go up in flames. Sprinkler systems provide residents with a better chance of getting out of a fire alive, in addition to minimizing damage – which can cut insurance costs.

That said, the Christie panel's recommendation to let the sprinkler rule proceed was given somewhat grudgingly. Basically, the red-tape panel said the reg should go ahead – providing it could still be afforded two years from now. The Department of Community Affairs was "strongly encouraged to ensure ... that this provision be revisited in the event that the state's economy has not recovered by the January, 2012, the effective date of this requirement," said the panel's report.

Presumably, New Jerseyans will value their lives just as much two years from now. So it's wrong to play the sprinkler rule off against recessionary concerns. The several thousand dollars that these systems cost would be a worthwhile investment in safety no matter what the economic climate.

Home builders in Pennsylvania are citing cost concerns in fighting a similar requirement for sprinklers in the state that takes effect in January, a year before New Jersey's requirement.

But if the cost-conscious Christie administration can agree that the fire-safety concerns are paramount, that should reassure Pennsylvania officials that it's the smart thing for them to move ahead with their fire sprinkler program.