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State urges fire sprinklers in older high-rises

By KATHLEEN LYNN
STAFF WRITER

New Jersey is proposing that older high-rise apartment buildings and condos be required to add sprinklers for fire safety.

Although sprinklers have been required in residential buildings of six stories or higher built since 1989, older buildings are exempt.

Last week, however, the state Department of Community Affairs proposed a change to the state fire code that would require older high-rises – both residential and office buildings – to be retrofitted to include sprinklers.

"High-rise buildings represent a special hazard, in that rescue and firefighting operations are hampered by the height of the building," the department said in proposing the new rule, which is now subject to a 60-day comment period.

But landlords are concerned about the cost of retrofitting older buildings. Putting sprinklers into new construction costs an estimated \$1 to \$2.50 per square foot, but adding them to older buildings is much more expensive.

The Waldwick-based New Jersey Fire Sprinkler Advisory Board, which represents companies that install sprinklers, estimates the cost of retrofitting at \$5 to \$7 a square foot.

But the New Jersey Apartment Association, which represents landlords, says the number is even higher, estimating the cost per unit at \$10,000 to \$25,000 – or \$1 billion for the entire state.

That cost, in turn, would have to be passed on to tenants, bumping up rents by at least \$200 to

\$400 a month for a decade, said Nicholas Kikis, director of regulatory affairs for the apartment association.

"The question becomes, how can tenants afford a \$1 billion price tag added to the cost of housing?" Kikis said. "New Jersey already has a housing affordability crisis."

A spokesman for the Community Associations Institute of New Jersey, which represents condo and co-op boards, said the group is reviewing the proposal.

Joel Ellis, a Hackensack lawyer who represents a number of high-rise condo and co-op buildings, said he was also reviewing the proposal and could not comment in detail. But he said, "I can tell you that the economic impact on a bunch of these buildings will be staggering."

The Department of Community Affairs acknowledged that the expense "may be significant."

"However, it is the department's position that because this is a life-safety issue, the cost is justified," state officials wrote in the proposal.

Under the proposed regulations, building owners would have four years to install sprinklers.

The apartment association argued that most fatal home fires occur in one- and two-family buildings, not multi-unit buildings, which have stricter building codes, such as emergency lighting in stairwells, elevators designed for safety and, in some cases, concrete walls.

"These buildings were built with the idea of containing fire," Kikis said.

In 2005, Kikis said, 52 of the

100 fire fatalities in New Jersey occurred in single-family homes; 22 fatalities occurred in low- and

Facts about fires

■ More than 3,500 people die in fires in the U.S. every year.

■ 80 percent of fire deaths occur in homes.

■ Cooking is the leading cause of fires overall, but smoking is the No. 1 cause of fatal fires.

■ A fire left unchecked doubles in size every minute.

midrise apartment buildings. There were no fatalities in high-rises.

"The greatest need for fire safety enhancements is in one- and two-family housing," Kikis said.

Vincent Fichera of the sprinkler advisory board said that the sprinklers are needed not just to protect high-rise residents, but also firefighters. And he argued that landlords and condo associations could recoup some of the cost of adding sprinklers through lower insurance premiums.

Sprinklers were developed around 130 years ago to fight fires in textile factories, Fichera said. A sprinkler is set off when a heat sensor detects certain temperatures – typically 165 to 200 degrees.

Only the sprinkler that detects this heat goes off. If the fire is localized, you don't get a shower throughout the apartment, said Fichera.

"The water damage is a lot less than people think," he said.

Kathy Gerstner, a fire program specialist with the U.S. Fire Administration, agreed. "They don't use a ton of water, and they don't ruin your whole house," she said. E-mail: lynn@northjersey.com



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