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Will your apartment building get sprinklers?

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The state will decide within days whether to require older high-rise apartment buildings to install sprinkler systems for fire safety.

The Division of Consumer Affairs has until Sept. 17 to approve or reject the proposed regulations, which are being pushed both by fire departments across the state and the fire sprinkler industry.

But rental apartment building owners, and individual apartment owners, have complained that the cost of doing so is prohibitive.

State law began requiring that new high-rise buildings include sprinkler systems in the late 1980s, but older buildings were not affected.

The proposed law has undergone a months-long process of public comment and review. It includes buildings that have either six or more stories or are 75 feet or higher and would require the sprinklers to be installed within four years.

Advocates for the regulations say that Bergen County has 98 of the state's approximately 470 high-rise buildings that would require retrofitting. Almost all of those buildings are in Hackensack or Fort Lee.

Today, in a final effort to persuade the department to adopt the regulations, fire officials and sprinkler industry representatives used a fiery demonstration to show the effectiveness of sprinklers.

At the county's fire academy in Mahwah, sprinkler proponents started trash-can fires in two identically outfitted "bedrooms" contained within pods, complete with desks, beds and a computer.

The first, with no sprinkler, quickly burned out of control and had consumed the entire room in fewer than six minutes - less time than it might take for firefighters to reach an apartment after an emergency call. The second, however, caused only minimal damage and was put out by the sprinkler in less than two minutes.

"This is a life-safety issue," said Vinny Fichera, executive director of the New Jersey Fire Sprinkler Advisory Board, a cooperative association between the local

sprinkler workers union and manufacturers. "We're not trying to hide the fact that we're an industry group. But what we sell is safety."

Fichera said his group estimates that installing sprinklers in high-rise buildings would cost approximately \$7.50 per square foot, or \$7,500 for a 1,000-square-foot apartment.

But the New Jersey Apartment Association, a trade group that represents the owners of multifamily rental properties and opposes the regulations, estimates that the costs would be as much as \$15,000 to \$30,000 per apartment, which would force rents upward by \$200 to \$400 a month, said Nicholas Kikis, the group's director of regulatory affairs and research.

"New Jersey's working families simply cannot afford the rent increases that would be required to pay for retrofitting fire sprinklers," said Kikis. "This proposal would seriously worsen the state's housing affordability crisis. High-rise residents, both rental as well as condo owners, have generated literally thousands of letters in opposition to this proposal."

The Division of Consumer Affairs hired its own consultant to study the issue and concluded that the likely cost is somewhere in the middle: \$16.22 per square foot, said spokesman Chris Donnelly.

Larry Rauch, the chief of the county fire academy, said that many fire departments back the law. "Sprinklers not only save civilians' lives, but they save firefighters' lives," he said.

Russ Fleming, the executive vice president of the national sprinkler association, said the regulations are an effort to avoid a Seton Hall-type disaster, when a fire swept through dormitories in 2000 and killed three students, eventually leading the state to require all colleges to install sprinklers.

Kikis said high-rise buildings are generally safe; he pointed to state data showing that most fire-related deaths occur in single-family homes, with few deaths in high-rise buildings.

Fleming said several cities, including St. Louis and Phoenix, as well as the state of Massachusetts have adopted similar retrofit regulations.

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