



Every Jersey high-rise needs fire sprinklers

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All high-rise buildings constructed in New Jersey since 1987 are equipped with up-to-date fire-sprinkler systems, as required by law. That is the good news. The bad news is that some 490 similar high-rises — about half of the state's total — lack fire-sprinkler systems of any kind or are guarded by grossly inadequate sprinkler coverage because they were built before the regulations went into effect.

Most of those buildings without protection are residential properties. As a result, roughly 50 percent of state residents who live in buildings more than 75 feet tall — the equivalent of seven stories high — aren't as well shielded against the loss of property or life as inhabitants of high-rises built within the last 20 years.

This dangerous and in many ways negligent oversight can and must be corrected.

The state Department of Community Affairs is considering rules that would require all high-rises in New Jersey, no matter when they were built, to have sprinkler systems that conform to current standards. It should be self-evident the rules are a must.

New Jersey knows all too well the toll that fire can take in buildings where multiple people or families might live after the horrible consequences of the 2000 dormitory blaze at [Seton Hall University](#) in South Orange, where three students were killed and 58 others were injured, some irreparably scarred. Boland Hall, where the fire raged, lacked a modern fire-sprinkler system. New Jersey responded quickly by requiring all college dorms throughout the state to be retrofitted with fire-sprinkler systems. Despite broad concerns about the cost and the massive implementation required, schools across the state managed the expense and finished the job ahead of schedule. Dormitory students are far safer today thanks to that action.

Even so, owners of older high-rises and their tenant associations oppose the proposed upgrades. As one might imagine, their No. 1 gripe is the cash involved. Building owners claim that installation of fire sprinklers can run as high as \$40 a square foot. Other estimates, however, put that figure at closer to \$7.50 a square foot. The real amount is probably somewhere in between. But the initial outlay would eventually pay for itself — that much is certain — through lower costs for fire insurance for both owners and tenants, and lower replacement costs for property that is saved when a fire is snuffed out. Meanwhile, none of these economic advantages begin to speak to the human savings that would be realized — and are impossible to gauge.

Think of it. Not only are residents put at risk when a fire erupts, but so are the men and the women of the fire services who are called to respond.

Consider as well the benefits for New Jersey's municipalities. High-rise office buildings are often a key engine in local economies; the loss of one can mean the loss of jobs and of revenues across an entire community.

The proposed rules are of particular importance to this portion of the state, where high-rise development is a common part of the landscape. In Middlesex County alone, 18 of its 45 high-rises lack fire-sprinkler protection.

Want more evidence? A high-rise blaze in Phillipsburg killed three people and injured dozens of others, including firefighters, in 2006. The building had fire-resistant construction and fire alarms, but no fire sprinklers. And when partial fire sprinklers were present during a high-rise fire last September in Asbury Park, they weren't enough to prevent critical injuries to three of the building's residents or seven of the firefighters who responded.

Enough, already. Fire-sprinkler systems must be a requirement for every high-rise in the state. Lives and homes depend upon it.