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COOLING OFF HOT SPOTS

Sprinkler proposal includes older high-rises

Home News Tribune Online 09/20/07

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By KEN SERRANO STAFF WRITER kserrano@thnt.com

SAYREVILLE — A column of flames and smoke spiraled from a "bedroom" where temperatures from a fire that started in a trash can and spread to curtains shot up to 2,000 degrees in about 3 minutes.

The demonstration Wednesday at the Middlesex County Fire Academy graphically illustrated the quick spread of a fire in a dwelling — and how fast a sprinkler can put it out. A sprinkler head in a matching unit doused a similar fire before the temperatures rose above 90 degrees.

The object lesson was an attempt to promote a proposal to require sprinkler systems in older high-rise apartment buildings.

State fire commissioners, fire chiefs and firefighters attended the demonstration in a show of support for the proposal by the state Department of Community Affairs to update the state's fire protection codes.

Monday marked the beginning of a 60-day period for comments to be submitted on the sprinklers proposal. The comment period ends Nov. 17.

The amendment would affect the state's 400 buildings six stories or taller that have either no sprinklers or partial systems, said Arthur Londensky, a member of the New Jersey State Fire Safety Commission.

A law in 2000 to retrofit on- and off-campus student housing in the wake of the deadly Seton Hall fire that year placed New Jersey in the vanguard when it comes to sprinkler systems, officials said Wednesday. It was the first state in the nation to do so.

Regulations putting sprinklers in nursing homes and some nightclubs in New Jersey followed.

The latest proposed measure is another incremental approach to requiring sprinklers in more residential buildings. Many, including single and two-family homes in New Jersey, still are not mandated to have the systems.

But an association representing apartment-building owners in New Jersey said the current proposal will cost \$1 billion. And that cost will be borne by the tenants of those buildings, according to the New Jersey Apartment Association, based in Monroe.

"New Jersey is already the fifth least affordable state in the country," said Nicholas Kikis, director of regulatory affairs and research for the association. "This will exacerbate what is already an affordable housing crisis."

Kikis said recent measures have made the buildings safe from fires, including "smoke lobbies," doors that seal off smoke in elevator shafts.

"We're very concerned about the safety of the residents," he said. "New Jersey high-

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rise buildings are safe. They are built to compartmentalize fires."

Officials Wednesday estimated the cost to be between \$5 and \$7 a square foot for retrofitted sprinkler systems.

Vina Drennen, a fire-safety advocate, lost her husband John, a captain in the New York City Fire Department, to an apartment-building fire in 1994.

"The demonstration says it all," she said, noting that the simulated bedroom was destroyed in 3 minutes.

The United States is well behind in requiring sprinkler systems in residential buildings when compared to other industrialized nations, she said.

Comments on the proposed amendment can be sent to Michael Ticktin, Esq., Department of Community Affairs, P.O. Box 802, Trenton, NJ 08625.

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