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Kurasz: Suspension of fire code rules puts lives at risk

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GOVERNOR Christie has put on hold a pending regulation that will save lives of New Jersey residents.

When he took office in January, his first action was a 90-day freeze on the majority of new regulations, including the 2009 International Residential Code and its requirement that all newly constructed one- and two-family homes and town homes built after Jan. 1, 2012, contain a residential fire sprinkler system.

The Christie administration needs to finish this regulatory process that is so close to the finish line and adopt this safety regulation – which has already been vetted by numerous code professionals and governmental agencies, including the Department of Community Affairs, over the past two years.

The public has voiced its overwhelming support for this regulation during the recent public comment period, sending 1,675 letters in support of the IRC codes and only four letters against.

Fire service professionals – your local firefighters and first responders – fear there are special interests at work, otherwise this regulation would not have been included in the freeze. If this is the case, the residents of New Jersey should not become victims.

To further illustrate this point, about 70 new regulations were not affected by the 90-day regulation freeze because they met certain criteria. For example, regulations that would allow New Jersey to receive additional federal funding were not affected by the freeze, nor were regulations that addressed public safety. How could a safety regulation that would help to reduce the number of senseless fatalities and injuries caused by fires not be considered a public safety regulation?

By including this regulation in the freeze, it demonstrates that the governor does not realize the vast importance of the residential fire sprinkler requirement and how this regulation will help protect New Jersey residents and its firefighters who risk their lives to save others.



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Fiscal savings

The governor is also overlooking the fact that residential fire sprinklers can take some of the burden off of local jurisdictions and their fire service infrastructure, which should lead to lower property taxes.

The residential fire sprinkler requirement was included in the country's primary building code as a result of growing fire problems in this state and the nation due to lightweight construction materials being used by homebuilders during the past 20 years, plus more flammable home contents. These have created an alarming fire safety threat to our citizens, fire professionals and first responders.

About 85 percent of all fires occur in the home, a place where people should feel the safest.

By the time this regulation tentatively goes into effect on Jan. 1, 2012, 166 innocent New Jersey residents will have lost their lives, 972 civilians and 1,728 firefighters will have been injured and more than \$223 million of property will have been lost in the state as a result of fires, per yearly averages compiled by the New Jersey Division of Fire Safety.

Homebuilders have been critical of the cost of fire sprinklers, often throwing about extravagant numbers and claiming this will harm their sales.

This argument falls flat.

Nationally, the cost to install residential fire sprinklers in a new home is about \$1.61 per square foot, which is approximately one percent of the value of the home, according to a FEMA benefit-cost analysis on residential fire sprinklers.

This is a small price to pay when it comes to saving lives and homes, and similar in cost to upgraded rugs and cabinets that builders typically promote to homeowners.

Furthermore, the results of a 15-year study in Maryland's Prince George's County, which was the first in the nation to require residential fire sprinklers, report that during those 15 years, no deaths occurred and only six injuries were reported in fires where fire sprinkler systems were present.

Fire deaths in residential dwellings made up 89 percent of all fire deaths in Prince George's County for that time span.

In dwellings without sprinklers, 101 residents were killed and 328 were injured



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Success elsewhere

In December, Pennsylvania adopted the 2009 IRC Codes, including the residential fire sprinkler requirement, making it the first in the nation to adopt the fire sprinkler requirement on a statewide level. New Hampshire and California quickly followed Pennsylvania's lead and adopted the 2009 IRC regulations statewide.

The Christie administration must take decisive action in approving the residential fire sprinkler regulation and demonstrate to the residents of New Jersey that the state cares about the safety of its citizens and first responders.

David Kurasz is executive director of the New Jersey Fire Sprinkler Advisory Board. Send comments to grad@northjersey.com.

