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Editorial: For safety's sake

A measure to require fire sprinklers in newly built homes in New Jersey has unfortunately been tripped up by Gov. Christie's sweeping hold on all new state regulations.

Among dozens of rules that the new governor's executive order halted, the sprinkler regulation appears to be one that should be implemented before too long.

The governor has every right to delve into any number of regulations to determine if they are "unworkable, overly proscriptive, or ill-advised," as the charge to his "Red Tape Review Group" has been described.

The review, headed by Lt. Gov. Kim Guadagno, might help the state reduce added bureaucracy, as long as it's done responsibly and takes into account vetting already performed by the state.

The governor needs to be sure, though, that the sprinkler review meets his own directive that it be accomplished "without compromising public health, safety, or welfare."

Firefighters, code-enforcement experts, and fire-prevention industry officials have made it pretty clear they regard the addition of sprinklers to newly built homes as a matter of life and death - for residents, as well as the firefighters who battle blazes.

Fires in buildings claim an average of a half-dozen New Jersey lives each month. The sprinklers could boost survival rates, especially given the lighter materials used in many new homes.

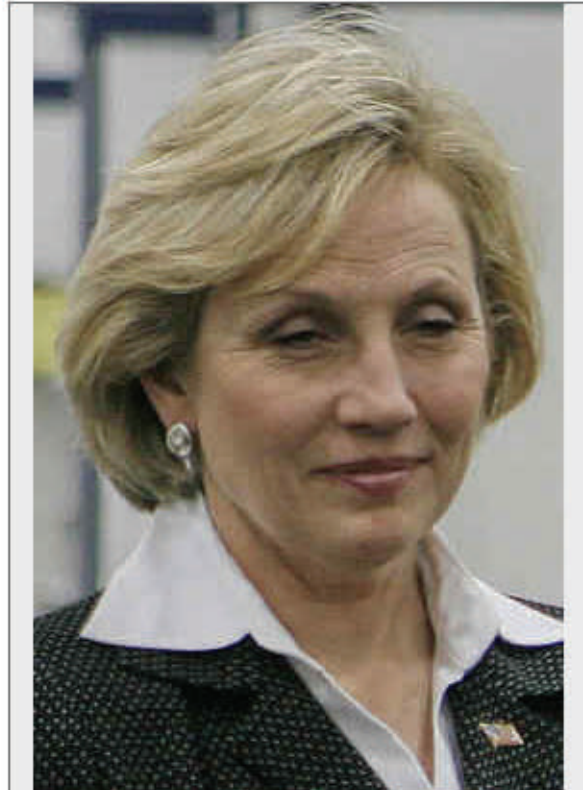
That's certainly been the experience in Prince George's County, Md. Sprinklers were mandated in new homes there years ago. No one has died in a fire in a sprinkler-equipped building over the last 15 years.

Sprinklers also limit property damage, which is why insurance companies typically give homeowners a discount on rates. That, in turn, helps mitigate the added cost of installation, estimated at 1 percent of a home's price.


In the waning days of the Corzine administration, Jersey officials were poised to put the state among a select few requiring sprinklers. The rule was approved by a state advisory panel and received glowing reviews in hundreds of public comments. The rule change was still pending at the Department of Community Affairs when Christie took office and ordered the broad review.

It's difficult to see how the governor's review will alter the compelling case for adding sprinklers to new one- and two-family homes, as required for multifamily homes.

For perspective, even slow-to-change Pennsylvania is moving to require sprinklers in new homes. Unless a builder trade group succeeds in a last-ditch court challenge, the Keystone State's requirement for sprinklers in new single-family homes is slated to kick in next year.



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