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Fire officials want Corzine to approve new sprinkler code

by [Tom Hester](#)/The Star-Ledger

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The Corzine administration has until Sept. 17 to decide if the new state fire code should require that sprinklers be installed in about 470 high-rise residential and office buildings statewide.

The proposed mandate for buildings over seven stories tall that were built before 1988 is favored by fire safety officials but building owners contend it would be too expensive and drive rents up.

The issue has been debated off and on before the state Fire Safety Commission for two decades, according to fire officials.

This time, before taking a position for the administration, state Community Affairs Commissioner Joseph Doria retained a consultant to determine the potential cost to building and condo owners and tenants. The consultant, Cambridge Construction Management of Somerville, estimated the cost of installing sprinklers at a little over \$16 per square foot of floor space.

"We are currently reviewing this information before we make any determination on this issue," said Chris Donnelly, Community Affairs spokesman.

The Fire Safety Commission has approved the sprinkler installation mandate but Doria and Gov. Jon Corzine have the final say. Since 1988 the fire code has required all new high-rise buildings to have sprinklers in rooms and hallways.

"This is fairly simple, we are in favor of this," said Arthur Londensky, South Brunswick fire protection code official, president of the New Jersey Fire Prevention and Protection Association and a Fire Safety Commission member. "It would not only protect those in the buildings but first responders."

Londensky noted that after a fatal Seton Hall dormitory fire, the state moved quickly to require sprinklers in dorms statewide. "This is the next logical step to take," he said, but if the new rules are not adopted by Sept. 17 "we will have to start all over again."

He said he believes proponents would be open to seeing the sprinkler mandate phased in to allow the work to be done when condos, apartments and offices are vacant.

Nicholas Kikis, director of regulatory affairs and research for the Trenton-based New Jersey Apartment Association, argues current state fire code requirements calling for high-rises to be safe and retrofitting the buildings with sprinklers would create a financial hardship for owners or tenants. He said the Apartment Association estimates it would cost \$15,000 to \$30,000 per apartment depending on the construction of the building.

"Families living in these apartments simply cannot afford the rent increases that would be caused by the retrofitting. This would raise rents over ten years between \$200 and \$400 a month and would seriously exacerbate the state's housing affordability crisis," Kikis said.