

Sprinkler bans are bad public policy

The 2009 International Residential Code requires fire sprinklers in new homes as a minimum requirement for safeguarding public safety, health and general welfare.¹ Home builders are pushing for statewide bans on the requirement.

The home building industry has its own narrow interests at heart. Lawmakers who go along with a statewide ban overlook an important fact. A unilateral ban on residential fire sprinklers restricts growth in cities, counties and un-incorporated areas. The following examples describe how a statewide ban on residential fire sprinklers can negatively affect local governments.

City A -

City A wants to allow a residential development in an area that lacks fire hydrants - if the homes are equipped with sprinklers. If a state law bans requiring residential sprinklers, the developer cannot build the homes unless the nearest water line – which is two miles away – is extended and hydrants installed.

City B -

City B has required sprinklers in all new homes for years. One of the many benefits has been operating its fire department with fewer firefighters than neighboring cities. A statewide ban on residential sprinklers would require increasing the size of the fire department, and thus the city budget.

City C -

City C has hilly areas where the only developable lots have steep drop-offs, which makes the backs of homes inaccessible to fire department ladders and hoses. The city has justified building homes there if they are equipped with sprinklers. The city has adopted the same policy for other areas where steep elevations restrict or slow fire apparatus. A statewide ban on residential sprinklers would prohibit the city from future residential development.

City D -

City D is a small town that is adding new residential subdivisions. However, its volunteer fire department cannot keep up with the increased demand. New volunteers are difficult or impossible to find. Most of the existing volunteers work out of town, and the city finds itself with little fire protection during the day. Since residential sprinklers reduce the demand on fire departments by over 50 percent, the city plans to require sprinklers in new homes so it can keep operating with a volunteer department. A statewide ban on residential sprinklers will force the city to hire career firefighters, which will greatly increase its expenses.

City E -

City E wants to build “New Urban” developments in areas now occupied with abandoned buildings. Such developments increase the population density by reducing the distance between homes. Narrow street widths and fewer cross streets make the developments more pedestrian friendly, but they delay emergency vehicles.

Without compensating for the increase in fire risk, such changes violate the building code in two ways. First, the minimum separations between homes in the code limit the risk of fire spread from one home to the next. Reducing the separations would require doubling the size of the fire department in order to protect against conflagrations. Second, the current street width requirements are based on the need for fire apparatus to get around each other. Reducing street widths would prevent enough fire apparatus from approaching buildings for manual suppression.

The city code officials concluded that the changes could be allowed if the new homes are protected with sprinklers. A statewide ban would leave the city with the choice of not allowing the new developments, accepting the risk of conflagration in densely populated areas, or doubling the size of the fire department.

Cities and towns like the five cited above exist in every state. State lawmakers who are considering statewide bans on sprinklers need to know how their attempt to help a special interest group will harm the future of many of their cities, towns and citizens.

1. 2009 International Residential Code®, Section R101.3.