

Victory for Homebuilders: Code Council Rejects Mandatory Fire Sprinklers

In a monumental victory for the homebuilding industry, the State Building Code Council (SBCC) on November 12 voted to remove fire sprinklers in residential homes as a statewide mandate. The victory was the result of months of teamwork between BIAW and the Washington Association of Building Officials (WABO) to eliminate fire sprinklers from the International Residential Code (IRC).

The International Code Council (ICC) voted last year to adopt the mandate requiring fire sprinklers in all new townhouses and single-family residences as part of the building code—all new single-family homes would be required to install fire sprinklers by July 1, 2011. While homebuilders and affordable housing advocates strongly protested the decision as unnecessary and cost prohibitive, fire officials lobbied aggressively in favor of the sprinkler requirement.

The final decision on mandated fire sprinklers was left to individual states. Washington is now the sixth state to reject the ICC's fire sprinkler mandate since its adoption in 2008.

BIAW and WABO warned the SBCC that mandatory fire sprinklers in new homes are costly and should remain a voluntary option for consumers, and strongly urged the Council to remove fire sprinklers as a statewide mandate. BIAW members from around the state joined BIAW and WABO officials in testifying against mandatory fire sprinklers.

BIAW and WABO pointed out that residential fires and fire deaths have consistently declined. From 1980 to 2005, the number of home fires dropped by 50 percent while the number of one and two-family housing units increased by over 47 percent. Coupled with the 54 percent decline in fire deaths and 37 percent increase in population between 1977 and 2007, the numbers demonstrate housing has become much safer without mandated fire sprinklers.

And a 2009 report by the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) found the reliability of fire sprinklers questionable. According to the NFPA, sprinklers did not operate or were not effective in 61 percent of fires occurring in one and two family homes.

Combined with the SBCC's own findings that fire sprinklers are much more costly than fire officials claimed (\$1.50 to \$8.50 per square foot), the Council ultimately rejected the burdensome ICC mandate.

The decision whether to require fire sprinklers in single-family homes will remain with local jurisdictions.

The SBCC's vote to remove the fire sprinkler mandate for residential construction is a tremendous victory the homebuilding industry and the cause of affordable housing. Broadly mandating sprinklers statewide would have made it more difficult for builders to build new homes working families can afford.

BIAW thanks all association members who testified at the public hearings and contacted individual SBCC members. A thank you is also owed to the tenacious efforts of Senator Janea Holmquist (R-Moses Lake), who serves as an ex-officio member of the SBCC. Senator Holmquist vigorously opposed the fire sprinkler mandate.