

Hi-Riser

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CONDO SPRINKLER SYSTEMS CAUSE FLOOD OF FINANCIAL CONCERNS

BY: FALLAN PATTERSON

Gov. Charlie Crist may soon have to decide whether to push back a deadline forcing condominium buildings to be retrofitted with sprinkler systems, which some unit owners, association board members and attorneys say are unnecessary.

If approved, House Bill 419 - sponsored by Rep. Ellyn Bogdanoff, R-Fort Lauderdale - would push the sprinkler retrofit deadline from 2014 to 2025 to alleviate financial burdens that associations might face in the current economy.

The National Life Safety Code started requiring all new construction and existing condominiums in 1990 to have sprinkler systems. Prior to this, there was no national requirement. According to Buddy Dewar, director of regional operations for the National Fire Sprinkler Association, the average cost per square foot to retrofit for sprinkler systems is \$2.23.

"If you are a condo owner and there is a fire and someone dies, there is going to be litigation," Dewar said.

"It's a huge endeavor," said **Donna Berger**, an attorney with association law firm Katzman Garfinkel Rosenbaum. "Can you image having to put people out on foreclosure because they have to pay for sprinklers?"

Buildings that are 75 feet or higher would be required to comply with the bill. This could cost unit owners millions of dollars, about \$5,000 per unit, Berger said.

"Can you imagine having to sell this to someone who has lived in the building for 30 years and never had a fire?" Berger said. Sarah Maman, a fire protection engineer in South Florida for more than 30 years, said she understands the economic state but added that associations should be prepared for the expense.

"This has been around for a long time. It would be prudent to put aside money and not leave it to the very end," Maman said. "Many buildings spend a lot of money on decor and aesthetics, and fire departments are concerned about that."

Pio Ieraci, president of the Galt Mile Community Association, has been following this bill and its supporters, hoping the deadline is extended so the language can be changed to exclude all-concrete high-rises by the next deadline.

"The language placed by the Legislature is a terrible burden on our condo associations," Ieraci said. "There's no proof or need for sprinkler systems to be installed."

Not only is the undertaking a large financial obligation, but Ieraci says the consequences outweigh the possible benefits the sprinkler systems could bring.

"They'd have to drill through concrete and modify the entire building," he said. "And if the sprinkler goes off on accident ... the flooding alone could be catastrophic."

Maman said condominiums have three options: a full sprinkler system; an opt-out provision allowing sprinklers in only the common areas; or a life-safety system.

The condominiums along the Galt Mile currently have safety systems that signal on a main panel when a fire breaks out.

"You have to look at each building to see what's most cost-effective," she said.

"As long as the doors are closed to the apartment, the fire is contained," Ieraci said. "The entire building is concrete. There is very little combustible material."

Maman disagrees, citing furniture and curtains as flammable material.

The Galt Mile Community Association is already looking into upgrading to smart life-safety systems that would include voice-activated panels among other features to save lives during a fire.