

Condominiums could opt out of state-mandated sprinkler system upgrades under bill sent to Crist

By JENNA BUZZACCO-FOERSTER

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NAPLES — Condominium associations could see relief from a state-mandated sprinkler system retrofit.

The Florida House on Wednesday approved a measure that would give condominium associations the opportunity to opt out of the state-mandate.

The bill would give condominium associations the chance to put the retrofit — which must be completed by 2014 — to a vote to decide whether to proceed with the installation of additional life-safety systems.

State Rep. Matt Hudson, R-Naples, cosponsored the House bill.

The Florida Senate passed a companion bill on April 16.

“I think it’s a great beginning and a great recognition for everything that’s gone into this,” Ed Duch, the vice president of the Gulfshore Association of Condominiums, said about the decision.

“I think some of the code requirements just are not based on facts or a common sense approach to it. You can’t keep mandating older buildings to be retrofit when the risk issue can’t be substantiated.”

The state has said all high-rise buildings need to be protected throughout the whole building by an “approved, supervised automatic sprinkler system” by Dec. 31, 2014.

The retrofit order has been on the books for nearly a decade, and the state Legislature has twice voted to extend the deadline.

Both Gov. Charlie Crist and former Gov. Jeb Bush quashed previous attempts at relief.

But Donna Berger, the executive director of the Community Advocacy Network, said she’s hopeful the broad scope of the legislation will prevent Crist from vetoing it a second time.

The legislation also would allow condominium boards to collect rent from tenants in delinquent units, encourage investors to purchase abandoned units in failed communities, and increase the amount of past due assessments paid by foreclosing

lenders to 12 months from six months.

“If he vetoes (this bill) he’s affecting 3.9 million Floridians,” Berger said of Crist. “The stakes are much, much higher in this bill.”

Berger met with Crist a little more than a month ago and said she explained the importance of signing this bill into law.

The city of Naples has led the charge for changes to the law, Naples City Council has discussed the retrofit a number of times in the past year.

Naples Fire Chief Stephen McInerny told council in October that there are 30 high-rise buildings in Naples. McInerny said at the time that 13 of those buildings still needed to undergo retrofits.

Representatives for a number of Naples condominium associations told Naples City Council the retrofits could cost hundreds of thousands of dollars, something that could be cost-prohibitive in the current economy.

The legislation will also offer some relief to low-rise condominiums, said Ewing Sutherland, president of Gulfside Condominium Association and a member of the Community Advocacy Network.

Sutherland said some low-rise condominiums will also be able to opt out of a law that requires associations to install manual fire alarms.

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