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Supporters of sprinkler bill urge Crist to avoid veto

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The fight over condo sprinklers is heating up after supporters of the new sprinkler retrofit bill met with the governor while seeking support in cities and counties across the state.

The bill, HB 561, is sponsored by Rep. Ellyn Bogdanoff, R-Fort Lauderdale, and would allow associations in high-rise condominium buildings to decide — by vote — whether to retrofit their buildings with sprinklers or an engineered life-safety system and extend the deadline from 2014 to 2019.

The bill would also eliminate the requirement that condominiums and co-ops that are less than four stories tall install fire alarms, as currently required by the Florida Fire Prevention Code.

Opponents of the bill include firefighters, fire marshals and inspectors, and members of sprinkler system unions, who site the lack of sprinkler systems as a safety matter.

South Floridians who support the bill, including Pio Ieraci, president of the Galt Mile Community Association, and Donna Berger, executive director of the Community Advocacy Network, met with Gov. Charlie Crist on March 11 to urge him not to use his veto should the bill cross his desk this year.

Last year, Crist vetoed a similar bill that would have pushed back the sprinkler retrofit deadline from 2014 to 2025, among other provisions.

"The most important issue was to inform the governor what we are after is self-determination. It absolves the governor and the Legislature because it wouldn't be their decision," Ieraci said. "I think he understands there are millions of votes at stake here."

Crist is running for the U.S. Senate but faces a challenge from Marco Rubio in the Republican primary.

The group, including Ieraci and Berger, met for coffee at the Riverside Hotel in Fort Lauderdale after Ieraci asked state Sen. George LeMieux to help arrange a meeting.

Berger said she didn't think Crist had been given correct information in the past.

"I don't think he had a grasp of the issue," she said. "Yes, [the 2014 deadline] has been on the book, but no [fire inspector or marshal] wants to cut personnel, so they're looking at existing buildings as almost busy work."

"This is not a life-safety issue," Ieraci added. "This is simply a money issue. I'm hoping [Crist] will do what is in the best interest of the millions living in high-rises across the state."

Cities and counties are passing resolutions in support of the bill, including [Broward County](#) and Fort Lauderdale. Commissioner and Vice Mayor Bruce Roberts sponsored the resolution, which was passed March 2 by the Fort Lauderdale City Commission.

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"To date, there's really been no data that [sprinkler retrofitting] would save lives if it were in place. The association should make the individual decision," Roberts said. "We support the bill as written."

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