

Facts are in: Smoke alarms save lives

*Sprinklers
save property*

By KELLY WALL

As a follow up to the article which ran in the Friday, Sept. 18 edition of the Midland Daily News, titled "Homebuilders, firefighters disagree on sprinkler rules", homebuilders do not oppose residential fire sprinkler systems. Homebuilders, as well as many other groups, oppose *mandatory* fire sprinklers by inclusion in the building code for all new single and two-family homes. If a homeowner chooses to install a fire sprinkler system in their new home, homebuilders are happy to assist, but the truth is homeowners are not requesting such systems. A 400-person survey conducted in February, 2009 by Communication Research Institute of East Lansing found 82 percent preferred keeping sprinklers optional. Moreover, 37 percent said they would not have fire sprinklers regardless of cost.

Homebuilders believe residential sprinkler systems should remain a consumer choice and that this requirement would be a financial hardship for prospective home buyers and affordable housing groups such as Habitat for Humanity resulting in fewer homes being built for those in need. But this is not just an affordability issue; many people may simply not want to install a sprinkler system in their new home and they should have the right to make that choice. The following states have adopted legislation to prevent mandatory residential sprinkler systems; North Dakota, Texas, Montana, and Idaho.

Here are the facts:

Smoke alarms save lives. Fire deaths can be directly tied to the absence of or non-functioning fire alarms. A 2008 study by the National Fire Prevention Association proved the chances of surviving a reported home fire when working smoke alarms are present is 99.45%. According to the state Fire Marshal's office, 2.41 homes out of every 100,000 or 109 out of Michigan's 4.5 million residents are sites of a fatal fire each year. Of those fatal fires, 93% occurred in homes without smoke alarms.

New homes are safer. New homes are safer than ever with hardwired, interconnected smoke alarms, fire walls, and new fire-resistance construction materials. With interconnected smoke alarms no matter where the alarm goes off, all alarms sound throughout the home giving



Kelly Wall and his daughter

everyone time to escape.

Fires occur in older homes and many mobile homes. Mandating sprinklers in new homes will not solve the problem of fires in older homes and in mobile homes which are exempt from the requirement.

Rural settings are a big problem. Homes without municipal water systems will require costly holding tanks and additional pumps. According to a fact sheet published by U.S. Fire Administration, U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development and NIST Building and Fire Research Laboratory, fire sprinklers require a reliable source of water, either city water connection or storage tank for about 100 gallons of water and a pump. The main problem with stored water is to protect it from freezing. According to the same published fact sheet, these organizations recommend installation of smoke alarms along with sprinkler systems. Some fires can begin as smoldering fires that produce smoke and gases but without appreciable heat to activate the sprinklers.

Maintenance and inspections will be required adding even more cost to the homeowner. Additional maintenance, service costs as well as annual inspection fees, would disproportionately affect low-income families.

Failure rates are documented. A 2009 study by the National Fire Prevention Association found sprinklers installed in one and two-family homes did not operate or were not effective in 61% of the fires that occurred in these homes. Unlike smoke alarms, sprinklers cannot be tested to see if they are working. Eight years after they were recalled by the federal government over 23 million defective fire sprinkler heads are still in use today.

No significant savings is predicted on insurance costs; in fact it is uncertain how the insurance industry would handle water damage as a result of false activations.

Cost estimates are documented. Contrary to cost estimates provided by fire protection groups, the average cost quotes obtained by homebuilders is \$4,000-\$8,000 for a modest size home and can rise as high as \$15,000 for homes on a well system and for larger homes. Also, adding a sprinkler system will likely require a larger line, 1/2 to 1 inch, which will cost several thousand dollars.

Residential sprinkler manufacturers are driving the movement.

One way to ensure your success as a business or industry is to get your product mandated.

Most importantly, homebuilders and groups like Habitat for Humanity are being labeled as anti-fire safety, anti-firefighter and advocates for destruction. Nothing could be further from the truth. Homebuilders have families, friends and clients that they care very much about. How could anyone truly believe this is at all about safety? The recorded fire deaths and how they occurred are well-documented and we urge the public to become informed.

Here is where the issue is at, last September at the International Construction Code meeting, under rather unusual circumstances, the sprinkler proponents finally were successful in getting the requirement in the International Construction Code (ICC). Each state will now adopt or not the sprinkler requirement. Last July, the State of Michigan Building Code Review Committee voted 10-2 in favor of a Habitat for Humanity proposal to delete IRC Section 313 in its entirety, which calls for mandatory sprinklers. There will be public hearings this fall with the Director of the Department of Energy, Labor and Economic Growth making the final decision.

Habitat for Humanity is now coming under attack by the Home Sprinkler Coalition. How can you help? I urge the public at-large to write to Mr. Irvin Poke and tell him that residential fire sprinklers in new single and two-family homes should remain a consumer choice. Letters should be sent to:

Mr. Irvin Poke
Director, Bureau of Construction Codes

Department of Energy, Labor and Economic Growth
Post Office Box 30254
Lansing, Mich. 48909

Every fire death is a tragedy. Mandating expensive sprinkler systems in *new* homes is not the solution. It makes far more sense to direct the effort and resources toward educating the public about how residential fires can be prevented and by getting working smoke alarms in all homes, most especially older homes and mobile homes. Smoke alarms save lives, sprinklers save property.

Kelly Wall, president of the Home Builders Association of Midland, can be reached at (989) 615-3913 or (989) 835-6965.