

Montgomery Weighs Sprinkler Retrofitting

Fire Took 2 Lives in Older High-Rise

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Montgomery County officials announced yesterday they will push to require that older high-rise apartment buildings in the county be equipped with sprinkler systems, a measure they believe would help prevent a repeat of Thursday's deadly high-rise fire in Silver Spring.

Chief Thomas W. Carr said he will send proposed regulations to the County Council before the end of the month aimed at forcing dozens of apartment buildings constructed before 1990 to install sprinklers.

Carr's proposal follows by one day the deaths of longtime car dealer John C. Seidel, 75, and his wife, LaNita, 90, in a fire on the 11th floor of the Blair East Apartments. The

building had no sprinklers.

"This is to limit the potential for future lives to be lost," Carr said of his proposal. "We will maximize this catastrophic event into a positive to make sure it is less likely to occur."

The Apartment and Office Building Association, which represents building owners, said it will support the proposal, to be implemented over several years. Owners would pay for the sprinklers.

Such regulations have been under consideration for some time.

According to the National Fire Protection Association, it would cost \$14 million to \$20 million to outfit a building similar to the 400-unit Blair East with sprinklers. Costs could be higher if the project required asbestos or lead paint removal, officials said.

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Sprinkler Requirement Sought in Wake of Fire

SPRINKLERS, From B1

State law requires high-rise buildings constructed after 1990 to have sprinklers, but local officials determine whether older buildings should be updated.

About 80 of the 1,500 high-rise apartment buildings in the county are not equipped with sprinklers, county fire and rescue officials said. The proposal does not address condominium buildings.

County Council member Phil Andrews (D-Gaithersburg), the chairman of the Public Safety Committee, said Carr's plan does not go far enough, so he will propose legislation Monday to require all older high-rise buildings, including condominium structures, to be fitted with sprinklers.

Fire investigators continue to look into the cause of the Blair East fire and what they say are fire safety violations at the building.

Carr said discarded "smoking materials" in the Seidels' apartment caused the fire. After examining burn patterns, officials said they think the fire began in a corner of the living room, in an unspecified piece of furniture.

As flames traveled across the room, they shattered the glass door leading to the balcony, but the concrete walls and floor prevented the fire from spreading to other apartments, Pete Piringer, spokesman for Montgomery County Fire and Rescue, said.

The evacuation alarm did not ring, even after firefighters and residents pulled handles on wall-mounted alarms. Firefighters had to go to door-to-door to alert residents.

Carr said some fire doors did not close or were propped open, debris blocked emergency exits and a fire pump did not have enough pressure to work well.

He said a dozen citations were issued to the building's owner, the Tower Cos., ordering it to correct code violations.

Tower executives did not respond to several phone requests for comment.

Carr said yesterday that some of the violations could have been fixed had fire officials recently inspected the building for safety issues. The Blair East Apartments, in the 1200 block of East-West Highway, were last inspected in 2000, according to Piringer.

"I'd like to say we go and do a life-saving inspection of all the buildings in the county every year, but we don't," Carr said. "We

that."

Carr's decision to push for the new regulations follows months of negotiations between the county and the apartment owners group over how to implement the standards and how stringent they would be.

In December, the talks broke down after county officials insisted that condominium buildings be included, according to Lesa N. Hoover, a vice president of government affairs for the apartment owners.

Hoover said county fire officials agreed yesterday to proceed with the regulations even though they hadn't won the support of high-rise condominium organizations.

Although the details are still being finalized, Carr and Hoover said they would probably require high-rise apartment building owners to retrofit their property within 12 years. Owners who do it much sooner will be eligible for tax credits, Hoover said.

Andrews, chairman of the council's Public Safety Committee who crafted the 2004 county law that requires sprinklers in all newly built single-family homes, said more needs to be done. "People need to be protected where they live, whether it's an apartment building or condo," he said.

But other council members are skeptical of his approach, saying it could drive up housing costs.

"I am frankly more concerned about the issue of why the fire alarm did not go off than requiring condos and apartments to absorb millions of dollars in retrofit costs, all of which will be passed on to owners and tenants," council member Steven A. Silverman (D-At Large) said.

Carr said the expense would be worthwhile.

In the past week, county firefighters responded to fires started because of smoking in three high-rise apartments where elderly residents live, he said.

In the two incidents at buildings with sprinklers, one sprinkler head doused the flames before firefighters arrived.

"In one case, it was the sprinkler that put out the fire in a chair and a fire on the gentlemen in the chair," Carr said, noting that the man was slightly injured. "The difference in outcome — two deaths versus one injury — offers quite a contrasting outcome because of the impact of sprinklers."

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