

Councilman says sprinklers should be required for high-rise apartments

by **Fred Lewis**

Staff Writer

A Montgomery County councilman intends to pursue legislation to help owners of high-rise apartments and condominiums retrofit their buildings with sprinkler systems in the wake of a fatal fire Thursday on the 11th floor of a Silver Spring high-rise.

Councilman Philip M. Andrews (D-Dist. 3) of Gaithersburg, chairman of the council's Public

Safety Committee, said on Monday that legislation is required to avoid a possible "catastrophic event" in any of the county's 80 to 90 high-rise residential buildings that were built before law required fire suppression systems be installed during construction.

"We were reminded last week how deadly fires can be," Andrews said, referring to an early morning fire Thursday in the Blair East apartments on East West Highway that claimed the life of

an elderly couple who lived on the 11th floor of the 16-story building. "Despite the terrible loss of two lives, we should come away with a renewed commitment and sense of urgency that [these high-rise residential buildings] be retrofitted as soon as feasible."

Pete Piring, spokesman for the county's fire and rescue service, said fire inspectors found several code violations at Blair East

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apartments, such as an alarm system that failed to work properly, but the one thing that contributed directly to the loss of life was the lack of a sprinkler system.

"Had there been a sprinkler system in this case, we likely wouldn't be talking about a fatality today," Piringer said. "We think it's a life safety issue and a firefighter safety issue, which a lot of people lose sight of."

The building, which was built in the 1960s before fire suppression systems were required in new construction, must now install a system, Piringer said. The fire department will work with the management, The Tower Companies, to provide a flexible time frame for installation. No one from The Tower Companies returned calls seeking comment.

Andrews said he will meet this week with Lesa Hoover, vice president of government affairs for the lobbying organization Apartment and Office Building Association of Metropolitan Washington, to discuss details of the proposed legislation for all county high-rise residential buildings, such as how a retrofit program would be phased

in, length of time required to complete the retrofit and possible incentives to help cover costs. He added he hopes to have legislation proposed by the end of July and a measure adopted by the County Council in August before the council goes on recess.

David Weaver, a spokesman for County Executive Douglas M. Duncan (D), said talks of retrofitting sprinklers in high-rise apartment buildings have been ongoing for years but picked up again in the summer of 2004 with a tentative agreement reached in December.

"We began negotiations with the understanding that there was no legal or regulatory requirement that older buildings have sprinklers, but wanted to get to the point that they get sprinklers," Weaver said. "We wanted to provide incentives for them to do that."

Hoover said last week that the agreement was to require owners of high-rise apartment buildings in the county to retrofit the structures with sprinkler systems as part of fire code revisions. But that agreement didn't include high-rise condominiums; Hoover's organization does not represent condos. Andrews said he wants to extend

the same coverage to condominiums and will either propose an amendment to the county executive's measure or introduce separate legislation.

"There is no reason why there should be a different consideration," Andrews said. "I will do anything I can to ensure coverage of both."

Hoover said while costs vary tremendously from building to building — depending on the age of the building, whether there's asbestos present and the materials in the building — it can be expensive to retrofit buildings for sprinklers. "The idea is property owners recognize they have to be responsible owners."

Andrews, the sponsor of a law that took effect in January 2004 that requires all new homes be built with sprinklers, said the county already offers homeowners a one-time tax credit of up to 50 percent of their county property tax for installing a fire sprinkler system on any detached single-family dwelling or attached units or units in multifamily buildings. A similar incentive may be offered for high-rise apartments or condos. "The intention is not to put anyone in a difficult financial situation," Andrews said.