

Legislative Process, Not Cost Opposed by Wisconsin Builders

In response to an article entitled “Sprinkler Systems Would Have Saved 15 Lives” written by Green Bay Fire Department Captain Larry Wilson, in an article entitled “Builders Clarify Stance on Proposal on Fire Safety,” the Wisconsin Builders Association represented by Mark Etrheim, their President and Michael Miller, President of the Brown County Homebuilders Association, objected to Captain Wilson’s assertion that home builders oppose fire sprinklers because they are “too expensive.” What they said was, “The Wisconsin Builders Association is opposed in this fire sprinkler debate because it is a ‘rule change’ initiated by a department of the state government.” They added, “The original requirement [for fire sprinklers] was an action of the State Legislature. We are opposed to any significant change to industry standards that doesn’t follow the conventional legislative process for new laws.”

On the surface, and taken at face value, builders not opposing sprinklers on cost is great news. But given recent history, there is reason for skepticism. For many years on behalf of the entire fire sprinkler industry, the National Fire Sprinkler Association has been testifying before legislative bodies around the country in support of new and in defense of existing fire sprinkler ordinances, providing factual data to the advantages of fire sprinkler protection. Cost, however, has always been cited by the opposition as a major barrier. And what comes as no surprise to the fire sprinkler industry are that builders’ associations, like those represented by Mr. Etrheim and Mr. Miller, have been the primary opposition. But what should raise concern about this apparent radical change of philosophy is that just several years ago these very same organizations lobbied heavily for the right of the Wisconsin Department of Commerce to promulgate the types of rules and statutes they now oppose. That in itself should make anyone reading their rhetoric question whether these builders’ organizations have any real commitment to fire safety or simply subscribe to the argument of the day best supporting the bottom line.

If a 1 – 2 percent construction cost increase of a new home with an automatic sprinkler system is no longer objectionable to the Wisconsin building community as they implied, then let the entire fire sprinkler industry challenge them to encourage each and every new home buyer to have an automatic fire sprinkler system installed in their dream homes. It’s time to hold the Wisconsin builders’ associations to their word.