

Bill would limit cities' rules on fire sprinklers

Firefighters, homebuilders try to sway governor.

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A late-session provision that would prohibit municipalities from requiring sprinkler systems in some residences has left Gov. Rick Perry stuck between a brigade of Texas fire chiefs and the campaign dollars of local homebuilders.

Rep. John Otto, R-Dayton, tacked the amendment on to a plumber licensing bill during the waning days of the session. If Perry signs it, the measure would stop municipalities from requiring sprinkler systems in single- and two-family homes after Jan. 1, 2009, meaning the bill would nullify any ordinances passed this year. Otto originally tried to pass a similar stand-alone bill in early May, but the House never gave it a vote.

"I wanted it to be back to local control," Otto said. "I wanted the homebuyer to have a choice."

The bill's sponsor, Sen. Mike Jackson, R-La Porte, said he supported the addition even though it didn't coincide with the original intent of his legislation.

Homebuilder associations strongly support the change, but it has infuriated fire departments in some larger municipalities. About 20 firefighters called on Perry to veto the bill at a news conference Monday across from the fire-damaged Governor's Mansion.

"We just feel like that is a bit overreaching," said Jim Evans, assistant chief for the Austin Fire Department. "In terms of safety bang for your buck, I don't know if there's anything better" than a sprinkler system.

Evans was acting chief of the department on June 8, 2008, when an arsonist nearly destroyed the mansion with a Molotov cocktail. Perry's home was in the middle of a renovation that included a new sprinkler system. Had the sprinklers been active, the fire would not have gutted the historical residence, Evans said.

Proponents of the legislation said they don't dispute the effectiveness of sprinkler systems, but they take issue with the additional cost.

"We feel like it should be a decision made by homeowners," said Scott Norman, executive director of the Texas Association of Builders. "These are tough times. We don't need to be adding costs onto homes."

Norman estimated that a sprinkler system installed during construction would cost about \$2 per square foot. Organizers at the gathering of fire chiefs Monday afternoon put the figure at about \$1.60 per square foot.

Though the amendment allows local governments to require builders to offer sprinkler systems to homebuyers for a fee, that's not enough, said Steve Ralls, fire chief of West University Place, a Houston-area city. The city adopted a statute in May that would require that new homes be built with the systems.

"It simply makes no sense for the state Legislature to do this," Ralls said. "We believe our city knows better."

There are no set plans for such a statute in Austin, said Fire Department spokeswoman Michelle DeCrane.

Common Voices, a fire victims group sponsored by the National Fire Sprinkler Association, said about 50 Texas municipalities have such sprinkler laws on the books.

Homebuilders make up a sizable portion of Perry's fundraising haul. The association's political action committee, Homepac, contributed \$20,000 to Perry's political action committee between July 1 and Dec. 31, and Bob Perry, CEO of Perry Homes (and no relation to the governor), contributed \$25,000 over those months. According to Texans for Public Justice, Bob Perry and his wife were the governor's biggest individual donors in 2006.

The Texas State Association of Fire Fighters PAC contributed \$2,000 to Perry's PAC from July 1 through December, according to filings with the Texas Ethics Commission.

As with other pending bills, Perry will reserve judgment until he reviews the legislation in its final form, a spokeswoman for the governor said.

The last day to veto a bill is June 21.

Noted below are the transcripts from several Austin news stations.

News 8 Austin

Austin, Dallas and Houston fire chiefs asked Gov. Rick Perry to veto a change in Texas plumbing codes Monday. Authorities are pushing for the veto, because an amendment added to Senate Bill 1410 would prevent cities from adopting fire sprinkler requirements for single family homes and duplexes. The Texas Association of Builders supports the bill, saying fire sprinklers can make homes too expensive, and that existing building codes in Texas offer adequate protection.

"We feel that homeowners should make that decision because of the cost implications, the maintenance that's involved, the inspections," Scott Norman, with the Texas Association of Builders, said.

The fire chiefs said a sprinkler system has a unique advantage when it comes to saving lives.

"It stops the fire in its beginning stages as opposed to allowing the fire to grow and either burn hotter and faster and destroying property or in many cases people's lives," Austin Fire Chief Rhoda Mae Kerr said.

This bill would only not overturn any city's fire sprinkler code put into place before the start of this year.

KXAN (NBC affiliate, Austin)

It has been one year since an arsonist set fire to the 153-year-old Governor's mansion. There are still no leads in solving the case, but there is now money to rebuild the historic home. Through appropriations in the state budget of \$22 million in general revenue funds and \$2 million in donations from the public, the remodeling of the mansion is set to begin.

"It's hard to wait a year to start something you already know how to do," said the Mansion's restoration project director, Dealey Herndon. "But, it's very freeing and also very intense because it's like 'ok, now we know how to do it, we need to go in there and do it fast.'"

The state preservation board plans to restore the mansion to its original glory, with a copper roof, tall columns and a grand staircase. There will also be modern additions, like fiber-optic communications cables, energy-efficient appliances and wheelchair accessible entrances. The renovation of the actual mansion will cost \$15 million. Herndon said there is justification for the hefty price.

"It's a restoration project. You can't just go in there and build it; you have to preserve and protect the things that are in there and we've been very practical."

Renovation is set to begin as early as this week, when the board will start accepting bids from architects.

Fire Chiefs' Plea to Perry

Using the anniversary of the fire as an opportunity to lobby against a bill on the Governor's desk, fire chiefs from across the state set up a press conference right outside of the mansion.

"We are here to ask Perry to veto a bill," said Austin fire chief Rhoda Mae Kerr. The bill would deny local jurisdictions the right to require sprinkler systems in people's homes.

"In the rich history of this mansion, there were several remodels in that it could have been sprinkled," said Kerr. "And, if it had been sprinkled at that time, we would not be here today talking about the destruction and loss of that landmark."

KTBC (Fox affiliate, Austin)

The Texas Fire Association is urging Gov. Rick Perry to veto a bill that would change fire sprinkler requirements for some homes in Texas. The group says that if Gov. Perry signs the bill cities will no longer be able to require homes to have the same sprinkler requirements as apartments and condos.

Firefighters say that sprinklers and fire alarms can cut the risk of dying in a fire by more than 80 percent.

"(A) fire can happen to anyone," said Austin Fire Chief Rhoda Mae Kerr. "It's a simple and cost effective method in which to prevent the loss of life, prevent the loss of property, prevent the loss of possessions."