
Illinois Rep. Feigenholtz on attack with Chicago high-rise sprinkler bill

By [Greg Hinz](#) March 27, 2014

A North Side state representative is turning up the heat on [State Fire Marshal Larry Matkaitis](#) by sponsoring a bill that would pretty much strip him of his authority to implement fire safety rules in Chicago without advance permission from lawmakers.

At issue is a year-old feud that began with Mr. Matkaitis moving to require owners of hundreds of high-rise residential buildings constructed before 1975, both condominiums and rental buildings, to retrofit them with sprinkler systems.

Current law requires sprinklers in new buildings, and the fire marshal suggested he was just doing his job in promoting safety.

But the move sparked a political uproar, with state Rep. Sara Feigenholtz, D-Chicago, saying she got complaints that owners could be hit with a bill for \$20,000 or more per unit.

[Mr. Matkaitis ended up withdrawing the proposed rule.](#) But now Ms. Feigenholtz wants to make sure he can't try it again, saying: "I don't want to be reactive. I want to be proactive."

[Under Ms. Feigenholtz's bill,](#) a state task force would be created to study what to do about fire safety in high-rises and other structures. But Mr. Matkaitis would be barred from proposing rules on his own and merely running them by a legislative review panel, known as the Joint Committee on Administrative Rules, as he can now. Instead, any proposal by him would have to be approved by the House and Senate first.

Mr. Matkaitis' office did not respond to my requests for comment.

Ms. Feigenholtz denies that she's putting money ahead of safety.

"Sprinkler systems are effective. But a mandate is unrealistic," she said. "This should be a local-control issue."

Perhaps the federal government could pay for the sprinklers with tax credit, Ms. Feigenholtz said.

Or perhaps new city rules that are being implemented next year will resolve the problem, she added. But roughly 700 pre-1975 residential buildings in Chicago are involved, and the costs of new pipes, expanded water mains, asbestos removal and the like are huge, she concluded. "It's not just about hanging pipe."

Ms. Feigenholtz certainly is doing more than hanging pipe. Her bill zipped through a House committee 17-2 yesterday. And in the Senate, President John Cullerton, who represents the same North Side turf that she does, is expected to give the bill a big push.
