

# Chicago Tribune

## High-rise sprinkler bill stalls in Illinois House

Lawmaker wants to change who makes the decision on sprinkler mandates

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**By Lolly Bowean, Tribune reporter**

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A bill that would change the rule-making process to mandate sprinklers and other fire safety measures in residential high-rises has stalled in the Illinois House.

The issue of sprinklers has been a controversial one, especially since last year, when state Fire Marshal Larry Matkaitis pushed for the owners of older high-rises to install the devices. After an outcry from condo owners and political leaders, Matkaitis backed off.

But a bill introduced this year by state Rep. Sara Feigenholtz, D-Chicago, put new focus on the issue of whether sprinklers should be mandated and who should make the decision.

Feigenholtz's bill suffered a setback last week, however. Scheduled for a final reading in the House, it was instead pushed back to committee, she said Friday.

Feigenholtz wants any sprinkler mandates to first be approved by the entire General Assembly, rather than just a small group of legislators as it is now, she said. She also wants to establish a task force to determine ways to improve fire safety in residential high-rises and other structures without dealing a rough financial blow to homeowners.

"A statewide mandate will never get sprinklers in buildings," Feigenholtz said. "It will only create tension. The psychology of this bill is to get the focus off the mandate and get everyone at the table and figure out how we can get a step closer to safety."

In Chicago, sprinklers are required for all commercial and residential high-rises built since 1975. The city exempts older residential high-rises because of the expense of retrofitting

those buildings. Instead, those buildings have to pass a complicated inspection process to prove they have adequate fire safety measures — such as fireproof doors, sophisticated elevator systems and alarms.

Critics of Chicago's fire safety requirements say they fall short of ensuring residents' safety. But the state requirement of sprinklers has been dismissed as being too costly and unnecessary if other measures are in place.

Last year, Matkaitis pushed for sprinklers to be installed in the hallways and public areas of high-rises throughout the state within 12 years. The sprinkler requirement has been a state regulation for more than a decade but has not been enforced in Chicago, Matkaitis said.

He has no plans to push for a sprinkler mandate again, Matkaitis said Friday.

"I'm not changing the fire code. I'm leaving it as it is now, and I have no timeline to change that code," he said. "I am not going to hurt people in condos on the North Side."

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