

Fire Sprinklers in New Homes & the Cost of Public Safety: the Significance of Perspective

by Bill Ethier, CEO, HBRA of CT (February 23, 2015)

The public hearing on HB 6777 (2015), Requiring Fire Sprinkler Installation in All New One and Two Family Homes, presented a compelling study in what motivates humans to influence legislators. A lot of misinformation was put before the committee by sprinkler proponents that the HBRA addresses elsewhere (see HBRA's Facts and Truth statement). This article is an examination of human nature.

It appeared to this observer that it was too easy for some people to tell some other guy, who happens to be buying a new home, that he has to spend \$10,000 or more to protect himself and his family from a potential fire, rather than allow him to make that choice for himself. I mean, it's easy isn't it because we're talking about saving lives, right? Well, not really, but that's a factual issue I'll get into later.

More significantly, the same reasoning that leads to the decision to tell a new home buyer it's important to pay up to protect the home buyer's family **demand**s that it must be exponentially more important for sprinkler proponents, including any legislators who would do so, to rise up and protect their own families. Is this not logical? Don't all of us value the lives of our own loved ones more than some stranger's?

And, it can be done, you know. You can put fire sprinklers into an existing home for not that much more than it costs in new construction. You can run the plastic piping through the joist chases in ceilings. You can install a backflow preventer on your water system if you're on city water, or I'm sure you can find the space in your basement to install a \$1,500 250-gallon water tank and pump system if you're on well water. The sprinkler heads and annual maintenance fees will cost the same in new or existing homes. The only extra cost will be a little more labor to work around and through closed-in walls and ceilings, some repair to the walls and ceilings post sprinkler installation, some wall board compound and a new coat or two of paint. A good contractor can make it all look as good as new. Isn't that minor extra cost to protect your own families worth it?

So, it seems if you are so willing to tell someone else, a stranger, they must purchase this protection, I am compelled to presume you've come to the same decision about the safety of you and yours. If not, if you're willing to make that decision for someone else, but not for yourself, with all due respect, there's a tinge of paternalistic arrogance that overlays that approach to public safety. Rules for others good; but not for yourself, or put another way, "Do as I say, not as I do."

Putting paternalistic tendencies aside, the individual and societal cost of mandating fire sprinklers in all new homes is where the study in human nature really comes in. Admittedly, how one views the cost of sprinkler systems really depends on the perspective of the various advocates who surround this issue.

To home builders, the cost of sprinklers is highly significant but not necessarily because of the direct cost to the builder's bottom line on an individual home. If "the market allows," builders simply add the installation into the construction schedule and add a charge to the total cost to their buyers. Builders don't lose anything, and don't gain much either by installing sprinklers for a client homebuyer. The real question for builders, as well as Realtors – the reason we both testified in opposition to the mandate – is, will "the market allow" these costs to be absorbed. Undeniable economics dictates that increased cost for a product lowers demand. Higher cost housing means more people are removed from the marketplace of potential purchasers. On top of this economic fact, most buyers not only do not perceive sprinklers as a benefit but rather see them as a liability. Buyers do not want them. Adverse market realities, what builders deal with every day, is the real significance of a sprinkler mandate on new homes. Despite all the regulatory burdens

in CT that continue to face the home building industry to get a shovel into the ground, all the tax and fee impositions in CT that exact pounds of flesh from a home builder's business, and the industry's ongoing housing finance issues, the biggest complaint I have heard from builders over our continuing eight year Great Housing Recession is, "we don't have enough buyers in CT." Higher costs, from this sprinkler mandate or from other reasons, will depress demand even lower. That not only hurts the building industry in CT further but also our entire economy that is so dependent on a growing, healthy housing market.

To the union sprinkler pipefitters, the nonunion merit-shop sprinkler installers, and the sprinkler manufacturers – all of whom testified in support of the new mandate – the costs of sprinklers is also highly significant. Why? Because that cost is all going to flow to them as revenue. Like so many issues that filter through the halls of the state capitol, motivations for or against a new law can often be determined by the wisdom of "follow the money." When they profess sprinklers are worth the price to save your family, understand the sprinkler industry stands to make billions nationwide and hundreds of millions in CT with a mandate to install them in all new homes.

To the fire service, the fire fighters and fire marshals – who testified in support of the new mandate – the cost of sprinklers is insignificant. Why? Because they are all about public safety. They are 100% all in on public safety. And, frankly, that's a good thing. I am actually comforted by that. All of us, the entire public, want our first responders to think like that. We need them to think like that. It takes a special individual who is willing to think like that. So everyone should – as I do – have great respect and admiration for the fire service for what they do, to risk their own life if need be, to protect us. Their service deserves and demands our honor for them as well as our understanding of their position to support a sprinkler mandate.

To legislators, while you, too, should honor the fire service as I know you all do, you do not have the luxury of thinking like them or any other advocate for that matter. You are policy makers, law makers. You must wear a different hat to fulfill your responsibility to the whole public. Your role demands of you, before making a decision, to weigh the pros and cons, to conduct a cost benefit analysis, to bring the facts to the table and reflect various opinions off of the facts. You are, of course, all entitled to your own opinions, but nobody is entitled to their own facts. Arguing over facts is, frankly, silly if not stupid.

So, for the costs on an individual, before demanding someone pay \$10,000, \$15,000 or more to protect themselves, please reflect on your own decision to protect your own. For the costs on society of a sprinkler mandate, understand the fact that there's one residential fire death for approximately every 92,000 homes. There are over 1.4 million homes and apartments in CT. And, nobody knows which of those homes will have a deadly fire, although the facts overwhelmingly say it will be in a home that was built in the early 1980s or older, often much older. So, society will have to sprinkler at least 92,000 homes before, statistically, one life is saved. Do the math ... please. **It's an astronomical societal cost to save a life.** While the 1996 legislative task force on fire sprinklers determined the cost at \$403,000,000 to save a life, because fire deaths in homes have been decreasing and the per sq ft cost has increased since 1996, the societal cost now of a sprinkler mandate is approaching one billion dollars. Do the math. It's irrefutable. **As a public policy matter, legislatures and regulators do not regulate anything else, no safety hazard, no toxic chemical, no life-threatening condition, nothing, that remotely comes close to this societal cost to save a life.**

Human nature, such as it is, often vaporizes common sense and logic. On this issue, the costs are crushingly too great for society if that's allowed to happen. Sprinklers in new homes will not save the lives proponents claim. The vast majority of fire deaths occur in much older homes. The sprinkler industry won't acknowledge the facts because they're blinded by the prospect of wealth. The fire service can't see the facts because they're blinded by their passion for public safety. Facts, logic and common sense dictate strong opposition to mandating fire sprinklers in 1 or even 2 family homes, or as a local option.