

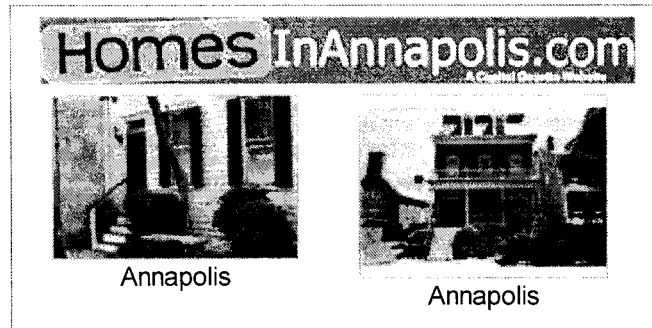
Sprinklers required in new houses

Council passes measure pushed by firefighters

By ERIN COX, Staff Writer

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Fire sprinklers will soon be required in all new Anne Arundel homes after the County Council approved the mandate last night.



Firefighters have lobbied for the across-the-board sprinkler rule for the better part of a decade, and one veteran volunteer firefighter called last night's victory a "landmark piece of legislation."

With the New Year, the council also resolved several other lingering issues from 2008, including tweaking the county's doghouse rule, expanding the solar energy tax credit and rejecting a measure that mandates pollution-reducing septic systems in some homes in the environmentally sensitive Critical Area of the Chesapeake Bay.

Fire Chief J. Robert Ray urged the council to adopt the new sprinkler plan, which expands the current mandate for townhouses, duplexes and apartment buildings to include single-family homes.

"Tonight you have the opportunity to tell all Anne Arundel County residents that their lives are valuable, not just those who are protected by happenstance because of where they live," Chief Ray said.

Recently retired former Chief David Stokes and a Maryland State Fire Marshal both attended last night's council meeting to watch the sprinkler legislation pass 6-1. Councilman Ed Middlebrooks, R-Severn, voted against the bill.

Home builders have resisted mandatory sprinklers in residential homes because the systems add several thousand dollars to the purchase price and buyers don't want

them. The home builders were pushing for an optional program that would require them to offer sprinklers to home buyers. A similar program in Howard County showed most buyers elect not to have the systems installed.

Prince George's County has required sprinklers in all homes since 1992, and fire officials report that there have been no fire deaths in homes with sprinklers since then.

Last night, representatives of the home building industry asked the council to delay the bill for at least a year because the slumping housing market could not support the added costs of installing sprinkler systems.

The measure introduced by Council Vice Chairman Cathy Vitale, R-Severna Park, whose husband is a career firefighter for the county, came after two devastating fires in the Annapolis area late last year.

In October, a man, 42, died in a fire at his home, which had neither a sprinkler system nor working smoke detectors. In December, a five-alarm blaze destroyed three homes in the Oyster Bay neighborhood before firefighters could extinguish the flames.

New homes will be exempt from the mandatory sprinkler rule if the house's water pressure can't meet some technical specifications laid out in county law. Those would be homes on well water for the most part.

Although the measure has seen wide support from fire prevention officials in council chambers, at least one local architect has cautioned that enough safeguards are not yet in place. Fred D. Fishback has warned that architectural codes relating to the design and installation of sprinkler systems are not advanced enough to protect homeowners from unforeseen circumstances, such as frozen pipes.

~~Doghouses~~

Also last night, the council put to bed a debate over the county's doghouse rule that began more than six months ago. The rule previously required any dog owner to provide a shelter for any pooch left confined outside. A prominent environmental activist was written a ticket for the offense in April, even though her collie was not in danger and she was watching the dog from a window. Technically, anyone who lets their animal out could be cited for not having a proper doghouse.