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Better late than never

June 24, 2008

Ontario is at long last moving to protect residents of high-rise apartments and condominiums from fire deaths by making sprinklers mandatory in all new buildings above three storeys.

Changes to the building code, which will go into effect April 1, 2010, will bring Ontario in line with every other province and jurisdiction in North America. The delay is needed to allow sprinkler manufacturers and installers to ramp up and to give enforcement officials time to prepare, according to the ministry of municipal affairs and housing.

Mandatory sprinklers have long been fought by the building industry because they would add an estimated 1.5 per cent to the cost of a new apartment or condo. But proponents like Pat Burke, Fire Marshall of Ontario, argue that the additional costs would be offset by a drop in insurance costs. And they save lives.

"The experience of other jurisdictions across North America is clear: residential sprinklers significantly reduce injuries, deaths and property loss due to fire," Burke says. High-rise buildings are difficult to access and the fire can spread quickly to other units. An automated sprinkler system can contain the fire until fire trucks arrive.

Sprinklers are already required in buildings where we work, shop, dine and learn. Ontario has finally chosen to protect people where they live.