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## Santa Barbara Backs Fire Sprinkler Mandate

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By [Lara Cooper](#), Noozhawk Staff Writer

Council votes to require fire-suppression systems in new single-family homes and in certain commercial and residential remodels

New buildings and many remodeling projects will now be required to install fire-suppression sprinkler systems after the [Santa Barbara City Council](#) unanimously approved the change Tuesday. The council voted to move ahead with amendments that would affect single-family homes and all new construction, commercial and residential.

Fire Marshal Joe Poire presented the council with information about the change to the city's sprinkler ordinance, which was adopted in the 2007 fire code. He said the ordinance updates were imminent, but have been delayed to get community feedback.

The amendments would change the city's fire code to require new single-family residences and commercial buildings to be built with the sprinklers, as well as be required for remodels that are greater than 50 percent of the square footage, or greater than 1,000 square feet.



Also needing the systems will be commercial remodels up to or greater than 50 percent of the total square footage. Any existing commercial space that changes to a more "hazardous" use, like a retail store becoming a night club, would also require the sprinklers.

Poire said many jurisdictions in California have similar ordinances. "The reason why is because sprinklers save lives and property," he said.

As many as 78 percent of all structure fires occur on residential properties, Poire said, and account for most of the deaths of civilians and firefighters. Sprinklers can respond quickly, preventing what Poire called “flashover,” which results when all combustible material, including smoke, in a space ignites, creating a dire situation for people trapped inside and for firefighters trying to rescue them.

Poire showed a sobering video of a Christmas tree igniting, with the small fire growing to flashover in less than a minute. “About 38 seconds into this fire, you would not have been able to cross that room and lived to tell about it,” Poire told the council.

He showed a second video of a similar room that had one sprinkler head of standard size, which releases about 20 gallons of water per minute. The video showed that the sprinkler head kept the smoke layer from igniting and eventually put the fire out itself.

It takes approximately eight minutes for the fire department to respond to a smoke alarm and douse the fire with the final application of water, Poire said. “During that time the fire continues to grow,” he said.

Two local incidents have proven the effectiveness of the sprinklers, including against a blaze that broke out in a residential building in the 4200 block of Calle Real.

“The victim was on a burning mattress, the fire sprinkler was above and the victim was unconscious at the time,” Poire said. “This absolutely would have ended up in a fatality had there not been a sprinkler system.” Instead, the victim suffered minor injuries and damage to the property was minimal.

According to Poire, sprinklers don’t go off all at once and they are activated by heat and not smoke. As for causing excessive water damage, he said that when firefighters show up, the teams usually pump about 300-400 gallons per minute, as opposed to the 20 gallons per minute of a standard sprinkler head.

The systems themselves usually cost about 1 percent of the cost of a home, nationally. In Santa Barbara, homeowners and builders could expect to pay \$2.75 to \$3.50 per square foot, and insurance often offsets a portion of the cost. The sprinklers are meant to address internal fires, but could not address natural wildfires, like the Tea Fire, Poire said.

[Helene Schneider](#) called the ordinance a “no-brainer” and endorsed the amendments.

[Das Williams](#) said he saw the issue when it was before the ordinance committee, and acknowledged it would result in a higher cost. “But the lives that this would save we cannot put a cost on,” he said.

Admitting he was skeptical of the changes was [Councilman Dale Francisco](#), the mayor pro tem who presided Tuesday in [Mayor Marty Blum’s](#) absence.

“I’m concerned any time we add further to the cost of building new homes,” said Francisco, who also served on the ordinance committee. But as he learned more about the process and building codes, which were brought about “to stop fires from happening,” Francisco said he now approves the proposal.

The item passed without dissent. In addition to Blum, [Councilwoman Iya Falcone](#) was absent Tuesday.

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