

Don't pull the plug on a fire-safety gain

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CHARLOTTE -- Last year North Carolina took an important step to improve fire and electrical safety in residential construction by becoming one of the first states to adopt the 2008 National Electrical Code. Nationally recognized safety organizations and fire and electrical safety advocates across the state stressed the importance of adopting the code -- and its key provisions for reliable technologies that improve fire safety in the home.

One such technology now in place in North Carolina is an innovative fire protection device called an AFCI, or arc fault circuit interrupter. Simply put, an AFCI is an electronic circuit breaker designed to prevent electrical fires by detecting a potentially dangerous wiring condition in the home -- a condition that standard circuit breakers do not protect against.

However, despite the proven reliability and safety, political pressure is threatening their removal when the N.C. Building Council convenes tomorrow.

AFCIs and safety issues have been the object of much debate over the past few months. At a news conference in Raleigh last December, state fire safety officials and I applauded the N.C. Building Code Council's initial actions to approve this important safety measure.

The great news is that, as of Jan. 1, 2009, all new homes built in North Carolina must feature AFCI protection throughout the home, including bedrooms, living rooms, dining rooms and other family gathering areas -- clearing the way for a potentially dramatic decrease in the number of electrical fires that occur annually, as well as a potential decrease in the millions of tax dollars used to battle these fires.

The most important decrease, however, may be in the number of lives lost, not only those of homeowners, but those of our firefighters who risk their lives to combat these fires.

The unfortunate news for North Carolina residents is that despite the obvious benefits of AFCIs, the device continues to face opposition by the very individuals you'd think would be supportive of new home safety measures. Throughout the AFCI adoption process and to this day, the N.C. Home Builders Association is leading the charge to remove this potentially life-saving device from new home construction.

The chairman of the Building Code Council -- the state-appointed body responsible for reviewing and enacting new home safety codes -- is a prominent Raleigh home builder and member of the builders association. At the Building Code Council's September 2008 meeting, the chairman introduced an amendment to delete AFCIs from the state's electrical code soon after the provision was adopted.

More recently, at the Building Code Council's meeting in March, the chairman succeeded in bringing to vote his proposed amendment to reverse AFCI adoption and recommend that the state revert to old and outdated safety codes.

AFCIs cost an average of \$60 per home. Yet, instead of equipping a home with this latest safety technology, home builders encourage buyers to upgrade to marble countertops, expensive kitchen cabinets and other non-safety related items.

It is the responsibility of homebuilders to ensure that their customers are provided the best protection possible. That's not only good business but also common sense.

AFCIs save lives, plain and simple. While there is a fairly small expense to install these devices, it is insignificant when compared to the hundreds of deaths, thousands of injuries and nearly a billion dollars lost in electrical fires each year in the U.S.

Fortunately for North Carolina residents, safety has prevailed, so far. The expanded use of AFCIs in our state is in effect and is being enforced by building code officials. On Tuesday, however, the Building Code Council will vote on the chairman's motion to delete this important safety provision. Then the recommendation would go to the General Assembly.

I encourage homeowners to contact their state legislators to voice their support for AFCIs. Residents deserve the safest homes possible, and AFCI expansion brings the state one step closer to making that a reality. Let's make sure it stays that way.