

Lighting a fire under governor on sprinkler bill

The day after Labor Day traditionally marks the end of the summer and the return of school, so it would have been nice if Gov. Jim Edgar used the occasion to sign House Bill 72 into law.

H.B. 72 mandates that all new public school buildings be equipped with fire retarding sprinkler systems beginning in 1992.



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New additions equal to 50 percent of an existing school's size would also have to have sprinklers. And the bill would force school districts

to equip old buildings with sprinklers whenever major remodeling work is done.

Every firefighters association in the state lobbied for passage of the bill because most municipalities in Illinois already require fire sprinklers in office buildings, commercial stores and warehouses.

Public schools, however, are exempt from local fire codes. Under an outdated state statute, the Illinois Board of Education was granted sole authority over how schools may be built.

Even the state fire marshal, who vigorously lobbied for passage of H.B. 72, can't cite school districts for violating the state fire code.

Firefighters argued that all the statistical evidence indicates that sprinklers can save children's lives during a fire. Furthermore, property damage could be kept to a minimum. And, with the ability of sprinklers to retard fires, the risk of a fireman losing his life battling such a blaze could be reduced.

The only opposition to H.B. 72 came from a lobbying group for local school boards that argued the cost of installing sprinklers would be prohibitive.

The lobbying group dropped its opposition when the firefighters pointed out that some expensive, fire resistant construction materials would no longer be necessary in school buildings if sprinklers were installed. The savings in building materials could be used to pay for the sprinklers.

All of this, I should point out, was going on while the Illinois General Assembly was revoking the power of local school districts to sell life safety bonds. The life safety bonding authority was granted local school districts so they could finance projects like sprinklers.

But over the years the schools, while complaining they had no money to install sprinklers, had used this special bonding power to build gymnasiums, swimming pools and other projects that had nothing to do with safety.

Rather than force the school districts to use their bonding authority as intended, the politicians decided to abolish the law even as the fire sprinkler bill was being passed without a means of financing installation.

If firefighters across Illinois have come away from this experience with the view that politicians are jerks, I don't think anyone can blame them.

But I'm straying from my point. The fire sprinkler bill was passed in June and now sits on Edgar's desk ever since.

As I stated at the outset, this would have been a good day for Edgar to have signed the bill. He could have stood in front of a school building as children arrived in school buses (still photographers and TV cameras in attendance) and announced that he was signing into law a piece of legislation that might someday prevent a terrible tragedy in Illinois.

But the governor has done nothing, which