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School sprinklers may save lives of firefighters

Firefighter Lonnie Jackson has seen the movie "Backdraft" and some of the scenes make him downright angry.

"There's no reason for firefighters to be risking their lives in an inferno because in most cases fire sprinklers could put out the fire even before they arrived on the scene," Jackson said.



PHIL KADNER

Municipal building codes in Illinois frequently require fire sprinklers in department stores, office buildings and hotels. But under

state law, school buildings are exempt from municipal fire codes.

Jackson is executive director of the Illinois Fire Inspectors Association, which supports state legislation mandating fire sprinklers in any new public school building built in Illinois beginning in 1992.

House Bill 72 already has passed the House of Representatives and last week passed the Senate Committee on Elementary and Secondary Education.

Other supporters of the bill include the Illinois Fire Chiefs Association, the Illinois Fire Services Association, the Illinois Society of Fire Service Instructors and the Office of the Illinois State Fire Marshal.

Sen. William F. Mahar (R-19th), who is sponsoring the Senate bill, said that key opponents of the legislation — the Illinois Association of School Boards and the Illinois School Administrators Association — have withdrawn their objections.

Jackson, a deputy fire chief in Mount Prospect, would like to see residents supporting the measure throughout Illinois.

"Would anyone deny police officers bullet-proof vests?" Jackson said. "Fire sprinklers are just as important in protecting the lives of firefighters."

"Firefighters have the highest job-related death rate in the country," he continued. "Forty-nine percent of those who die don't die from flames, they die from heart attacks because they're trying to perform superhuman deeds."

"If a school building catches fire, for example, people expect a fireman to be superman and perform fantastic feats to save a kid's life. Well, we're willing to do that if that's what it takes, but why not equip schools with sprinklers so the kid and the fireman aren't endangered in the first place?"

Jackson contends that by installing sprinklers in school buildings, school officials not only will make them safer, but cheaper to build and maintain.

"You don't need to construct a school of fire retardant materials if you have a sprinkler system and that means a cost savings," Jackson said. "And insurance companies almost always lower their insurance rates when a building owner installs a sprinkler system. Over a 10-year period, the savings on insurance can pay for a sprinkler system."

Since the new state law would apply only to new school buildings and additions to older buildings that equal 50 percent of the size of the existing structure, I asked Jackson if he thought older schools should be covered by sprinklers as well.

"I would like to see every school district pass a referendum mandating sprinklers in all of its schools," Jackson said.

"It's always annoyed me that school districts can build buildings with carpeting wall to wall and think nothing of it, but then someone objects to sprinklers because of the cost.

"We're not talking appearances. We're talking about saving lives here. There are a lot of old wooden school buildings in Illinois and they should be equipped with sprinklers. The community owes that much to its children.

"Some people will say that they haven't had a school fire in their community for 50 years. Well, how many fires do you need before you put sprinklers in? How many children's lives need to be lost before you think the cost is justified?"

"If you put sprinklers in a school building, the chances are the fire will be out before the fire department arrives. That means children won't be hurt, the building won't burn down and the firemen won't have to go into a burning building and die.

"We may not change everything overnight with this bill," Jackson said. "But down the road, every school building in Illinois will have fire sprinklers. We're going to be saving lives and property. That's the goal."