

Builders dislike cluster sprinkler mandate

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A last-minute amendment to Montgomery County's cluster zoning ordinance could drive away developers from the new housing option.

The amendment, offered by District 2 Commissioner Brenda Radford, requires sprinklers to be installed in all homes built in cluster communities.

At least one local developer, Derek Comperry, said he doesn't plan on building cluster subdivisions if he has to include sprinklers in the homes.

"Our customers don't want indoor sprinklers. In probably 15 years of doing this, I've never been asked to put in sprinklers," he said, "and I can't imagine any other builders wanting to do this because it's probably going to be cost-prohibitive for this area."

Jeff Burkhart, president of local Home Builders Association, said developing cluster housing with the sprinkler requirement is nothing he is interested in.

"I wouldn't even consider it," he said. "I wouldn't even be vaguely interested in doing it."

The sprinkler amendment was one of two cluster zoning changes passed by the County Commission Monday. The other amendment, requiring houses in cluster developments to be hooked up to a sewer system, was proposed by District 1 Commissioner Sissy Rankin. That amendment passed unanimously.

Comperry said he doesn't see a problem with the sewer requirement because of the space needed for septic tank systems. Most cluster lots would be too small to meet the state requirement of having two areas set aside per lot for a septic system.

Cluster zoning allows developers to create residential neighborhoods with smaller lots in exchange for providing sidewalks, underground utilities and open spaces.

County Building and Codes officials said Tuesday cluster developments are the only single-family zoning in the county that will require sprinklers. Some multi-family situations also require sprinklers.

Protecting from fire

Radford, whose husband owns a Clarksville plumbing business, offered up the indoor sprinkler amendment after talking with Shane Ray, Pleasant View fire chief, who said Tennessee is second only to Mississippi in the number of people who die in house fires.

Because homes in cluster housing developments are closer together, the threat of fire spreading between units is greater.

"I introduced the fire sprinkler amendment to protect the lives of our volunteer firefighters, and because I care about the safety and welfare of the families who will occupy the county cluster dwellings," Radford said.

She also said, while adding sprinklers to a house would cost an additional 85 cents per square foot, a homeowner could potentially recoup the cost from saving on their homeowners insurance policy. Based on Radford's estimation, in a 1,200-square-foot home, installing sprinklers would cost \$1,020.

Radford, who is also a member of the Montgomery County Fire Committee, said Tuesday she spoke with two local developers after the Monday meeting, both of whom said sprinklers would be too expensive to include in construction. Radford said she believed cluster housing was intended to be upscale.

"At the February meeting, the developers were saying that cluster homes would be upscale housing," she said. "What I am concerned about is the welfare and safety of families who chose to live in cluster developments."

Burkhart, also a city firefighter, said sprinklers have a downside.

"It's not that the sprinkler systems are a terrible idea, I'm not saying that. I'm just saying there is upkeep to sprinkler systems," he said. "One burst in a house, and there can be severe damage. I've had them go off in commercial buildings and do \$50,000 in damage."

Radford said her amendment wasn't a conflict of interest because her family has a plumbing business.

"It would be a conflict of interest if Radford's Plumbing installed fire sprinklers," she said. "Radford's Plumbing does not have a license to install fire sprinklers, nor will we in the future install fire sprinklers."

Radford said since 2000, her husband's company has specialized in plumbing repairs in existing residential and commercial buildings, not installing in new structures.

The County Commission voted 17-4 on her amendment — District 15 Commissioner Loretta Bryant, District 19 Commissioner Suzanne Uffelman, District 18 Commissioner Mark Kelly and District 20 Commissioner Pat Vaden voted "No."

The cluster option

The indoor sprinkler and sewer amendments were the latest revisions in the controversial, new zoning option for Montgomery County. Last month, the County Commission sent an amended cluster zoning ordinance back to the Regional Planning Commission with limits for development to land that's zoned R-1 Single-Family Residential and R-1A Single-Family Residential.

The Clarksville City Council approved the original cluster option March 3, meaning cluster neighborhoods inside the city limits are not required to include sewer hookups or indoor sprinkler systems.

Comperry said the sprinkler amendment ruined a good idea to promote green space.

"Before these amendments came up, I was absolutely in favor of having cluster options in subdivision development," Comperry said. "I don't think you'll find many — if any — builders and

developers who will do a cluster housing development if we're going to have to put in sprinkler systems," he said.

Radford said she would like to see the County Commission establish a policy about sprinklers in all multi-family housing in the county.

"In the future, we need to consider a sprinkler policy that would be applicable to all multi-family housing," she said. "That would include new apartments, condos, cluster developments and nursing homes."

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