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HOMEBUILDERS WANT OHIO OFFICIALS TO SET ASIDE NEW ELECTRICAL CODE REQUIRING ARC-FAULT BREAKERS

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Columbus- There's a fight brewing over something people don't often give much thought to - the kind of circuit breaker in the electric panel that supplies power to a home's outlets and lights.

The Ohio Home Builders Association wants state officials to set aside the recently adopted 2008 National Electrical Code, in part because requiring broader use of a new type of breaker could add \$1,000 or more to the cost of a 2,000-square-foot home.

Fire safety experts say arc-fault circuit interrupters can prevent electrical fires that kill more than 400 people a year and cause more than \$800 million in property damage nationally.

The breakers detect dangerous electrical arcing caused by poor connections or deteriorated or damaged wiring in walls or appliance cords.

They immediately shut off power to a problem circuit. The hitch: the arc-fault breakers cost about \$40 each while standard breakers cost about \$5 each.

"I don't want to downplay that there is a cost difference," said Russell Sanders, a regional manager for the National Fire Protection Association. "But when you look at the fire problem, it seems to me a small price to pay."

The home builders hope Gov. Ted Strickland this week will temporarily put the 2008 code on hold to provide an opportunity for the state board of building standards to study the new code more closely. That panel had approved Ohio's use of the new code late last year and a legislative rule review committee signed off, making it effective Jan. 1.

Builders say they aren't sacrificing safety for cost because the code changes only apply to new homes, which are already made safer under existing codes.

"There's very, very few housing fire deaths from newer homes to begin with, so I don't think there can be that much of a safety issue," said Vincent Squillace, vice president of the Ohio Home Builders Association. "Older homes that were built before there was an electrical code at all is where you have a lot of your fire incidents."

The home builders are an influential lobby in Columbus.

Last year, the state association's political action committee gave more than 90 legislators a total of at least \$128,000 in campaign contributions, including \$15,000 each to Republican caucuses that control the House and Senate.

Ohio and Massachusetts are the only states that have adopted the 2008 National Electrical Code so far, and Squillace says that's a sign Ohio moved too quickly.

"I think the long and short of it is the code was never thoroughly evaluated before it was adopted," Squillace said. "If it was a safety issue, it would have been in the codes a long time ago."

The National Electrical Code is updated every three years by a panel coordinated by the National Fire Prevention Association, and most states still operate under the 2005 version.

The 2005 code already required arc fault breakers for circuits in bedroom areas but the new code expands it to most other areas of a home.

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