

Circuit breakers rule may bend

Code council appears ready to reverse their requirement in homes.

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RALEIGH -- A state agency is poised to roll back a requirement that all new homes use a special circuit breaker designed to prevent fires.

The Building Code Council is expected to vote Tuesday on whether to reverse an earlier requirement that the breakers be installed for all rooms in new homes. The breakers electronically sense fluctuations in current that could be caused by a frayed in-wall wire. Such conditions could generate heat and ignite.

But the devices are expensive and unproven, say those who want to roll back the requirement.

"There's just no data to stand behind," said Mack Nixon, a Perquimans County homebuilder and member of the code council. "In this depressed housing market we're in, the homeowners are squeezed tight enough as it is."

Supporters say the talk of expense is a smokescreen. The devices cost \$30 each at retail, compared to a few dollars for regular circuit breakers.

Installing them throughout a moderately priced home would require two or three of the breakers, said Kim Reitterer, a Charlotte-based electrical engineer who is also a member of the code council. More breakers are needed in larger homes, but anyone who can afford a 3,000-square-foot home with granite countertops and other features can afford to upgrade circuit breakers, she said.

"If you ask people, the consumer, do they want a safe home for 60 bucks or 100 bucks extra, overwhelmingly the answer is yes," Reitterer said.

The breakers are known as arc fault circuit interrupters. The electronic devices watch for fluctuations in current that are signs that electricity is leaking out somewhere within the house. The scenario can occur if a wire is frayed or partly exposed. The leaking current wouldn't necessarily trip a standard breaker.

Generally, requiring the devices throughout homes is supported by fire officials. But homebuilders and some electrical contractors say the breakers are more trouble than they are worth.

Current building codes require protections to keep a nail from nicking a wire and other precautions, Nixon said. The arc fault requirement would add an unnecessary protection only to the benefit of manufacturers of the devices.

"They just want to get another item through the code cycles and get it approved and put in place, and then the consumer has to pay for it," he said.

Nixon said certain appliances, such as ceiling fans, can cause the breakers to trip.

What comes next

If the council repeals the rule, the issue would then go to an administrative hearing. Eventually, the question could end up at the legislature.

"This is not something we'll be giving up on," Reitterer said. "It's too important for the citizens of North Carolina."