

EDITORIALS

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FAULTS AND FIRES

For months, North Carolina homebuilders have been itching to overturn a new building code requirement meant to cut down on electrical fires. The hammer was expected to meet the nail this week, at a meeting of the state Building Code Council.

Instead, last-minute intervention by the Governor's Office led to a postponement of the vote until September. No reason was cited, but the effect of putting off a vote is to keep the new electrical safety rule in place -- and that's a good thing. Backing off to save a relatively small sum per new house would be a mistake.

At issue are devices called arc fault circuit interrupters. They're like the ground fault interrupters found in many bathrooms and kitchens, only the arc fault devices are designed to protect against electrical fire hazards, not shocks.

In either case, they employ solid-state electronics to achieve greater safety than do regular circuit breakers -- which in turn were an advance from old-fashioned screw-in fuses.

Arc fault interrupters have been required in the bedrooms of new houses for some time. Last year the Building Code Council agreed to go along with a national code change and require them to protect nearly all rooms of a house, and that rule took effect Jan. 1. Right away, some builders and legislators went to work to get the rule changed, citing cost considerations and buyer aggravation -- some homeowners complain that the devices trip even when there's no fire hazard.

Maybe so. Technological advances aren't always glitch-free, especially early on. But electrical fires are a proven, deadly threat. Charlotte fire officials, who like most fire-safety authorities support the more extensive requirement, point to nearly 400 fires there that the interrupters might have prevented over three or four years.

Since the new rule is already in place, the Building Code Council might as well postpone its vote indefinitely.