

## Building code panel shouldn't back down

**When it comes to fire safety, these gizmos are priceless.**

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What would you give for a gizmo that might protect your brand-new house from a fire that could destroy your home and kill its occupants? Would \$35 be too much for a circuit breaker designed to prevent electrical fires cause by damaged wiring? Maybe \$100 or \$150 for your whole house?

That's a question at the heart of a renewed debate by members of the N.C. Building Code Council over a regulation that takes effect Jan. 1 requiring AFCI (for arc fault circuit interrupter) breakers in newly-built houses.

Some builders want to dump the requirement. That's a dumb idea. Here's why:

The building code has required AFCI breakers in electrical panels for bedrooms since 2002; the regulation that takes effect in less than three weeks would require builders to install them for other common rooms in the house – places where people gather, such as kitchens, dining rooms and dens.

The nominal cost of the breakers and their installation is a tiny fraction of a percentage point in most new homes – “pennies, or less than pennies,” as Kim Reitterer, a Charlotte electrical engineer and member of the building code council, told *The News & Observer*.

Fire safety experts predict it could prevent tens of thousands of fires nationally each year, saving billions of dollars for homeowners, insurance companies and public safety agencies such as fire departments, emergency medical technicians and clinics and hospitals. It would be impossible to put a price tag on the value of lives saved from fatal fires.

Yet someone in the N.C. General Assembly sneaked into law a requirement that the building code council take another look at the requirement for AFCIs. It's not clear who that lawmaker was, but the argument evidently was that the cost of purchasing and installing the circuit breakers would run up the cost of a new home excessively without adding real safety value. Bedrooms already are protected by AFCI devices, and other kinds of electrical safety devices, such as ground fault circuit interrupters, already protect homeowners from shocks.

Modern wiring practices are much safer than they once were. Yet fires still occur in recently built homes – fires that may not have occurred if arc fault circuit interrupters had been in place.

The tiny relative cost of the AFCI devices does not suggest that their installation would be a financial burden to home buyers. By contrast, the potential savings in lives preserved and injuries prevented is simply overwhelming.

The building code council has begun a process to reconsider the AFCI requirement, but it won't vote on the issue until June. It would be months before the new requirement could be repealed.

Good. That's plenty of time for wiser heads to prevail and to make the case for retaining this worthy requirement. The cost savings of not installing these safety devices would be minimal. The cost savings of preventing fires and loss of life would be incalculable.