

RICHMOND COUNTY
 **DAILY JOURNAL**

New rule sparks debate

by Eren Tataragasi

9.17.09

A new North Carolina building regulation will require new homes to be installed with an arc fault circuit interrupter — something small in size, with a bigger price tag, that some say may or may not provide added safety to homeowners.

An arc fault circuit interrupter is something that detects that blue spark that sometimes occurs when you plug in an appliance. When that spark, or arc, is detected, the circuit interrupter trips and turns off the power.

“We don’t like them,” said Patrick Coble, owner of Patco Electrical Contractors in Rockingham. “We think they’re too expensive.”

Coble said the new circuit interrupters could add an additional cost of \$800 to wire a new house.

“A regular breaker is \$3.50 and these are \$36,” Coble said regarding the arc fault circuit interrupters. “We have problems with them tripping a lot and have to go back, sometimes just because someone unplugged a vacuum cleaner while it was still on and the homeowner won’t know what to do. They’re a pain. We don’t like them at all.”

The state Building Code Council approved the regulation Tuesday in hopes that it will reduce electrical house fires, but Coble said they don’t provide that much of an added benefit.

“Not many house fires are caused by an arc flash in a bedroom,” Coble said.

The rule for the last three years had been that an arc flash circuit interrupter had to be placed in bedrooms. Coble said this likely started because of the small personal heaters people were plugging in their bedrooms.

Coble said these circuit interrupters will not only have to be placed in every new home, but in remodeled ones as well. He said the device is similar to the GFI push-button receptacles that are in most bathrooms, but these new breakers are more sensitive.

The new circuit interrupters will have to be placed in bedrooms, living rooms, bathrooms, garages, anywhere that is considered a “dwelling,” Coble explained. But a stove and dryer won’t have to have one, but a washing machine will if it does not have a dedicated circuit.

Coble said this new rule is just bad for business.

“Contractors only want to pay so much for a house to be wired so someone has to eat the cost, whether it be the homeowner, contractor or electrician, and most often the electrician has to take a cut, but the homeowner gets the brunt of that cost,” Coble said.

But Robert Stroman, of Stroman & Associates General Contractors said he doesn't see the new rule as a bad thing.

"A new home is the largest investment a family can make, so an extra \$1,500 is not a major expense," Stroman said. "Electrical circuits have breakers already and anything else that can prevent fires is nothing but a plus."

County Director of Building Inspections Gary Williams and Rockingham Fire Chief Charles Gardner both agree.

"Anything you put in for safety is better," Williams said. "It will add cost, but you can't put a value on life. A \$30 circuit breaker could prevent losing a \$150,000 home, so it's worth it in the long run."

Gardner said these arc fault interrupters will make a huge difference in preventing electrical fires.

"The general problem is when you pull a drop cord out and you get that spark," he said. "It trips everything out and cuts it off. With the fault in them it will trip the circuit and keep any fires from spreading or getting worse."

Gardner said the fire department doesn't see many electrical fires anymore, except in older homes where the wiring is just old and not up to code.

"I can't remember the last time we've had one in a home that's been built in the last 10 or 12 years," Gardner said "Ever since they changed the requirements separating circuits, bathroom circuits, kitchen counter circuits - when they started doing that in the 80s and 90s, that eliminated the majority of causes of fires in homes.

"This was just one last area because right now, the code for the last 10 or 12 years has had ground fault protection for garages, etc., and now all the other receptacles will be protected by the arc fault. The problem we have now, if there's an electrical fire, is usually caused by an appliance malfunction, but with the arc fault, if that happens, it'll kill the circuit so it will solve some of those problems.

"This will eliminate those types of situations and will help in the long run. It will increase costs, but it's not that big of a cost added to a new house. The gains will outweigh any of the costs because if you can prevent a fire, you can save a house."

The Building Code Council of North Carolina, which is responsible for this regulation, voted on it Tuesday. The council had considered dropping the requirement because of the added expense to builders, but Gov. Bev Perdue wrote the council members last week expressing her support for keeping the requirement.