

Caldwell signs high-rise sprinkler incentive bills

By [Gordon Y.K. Pang](#) March 16, 2018 Updated March 16, 2018 12:05am

Two measures aimed at persuading owners of Oahu high-rises without sprinkler systems to install them were signed into law Thursday by Honolulu Mayor Kirk Caldwell, but a large portion of the press conference preceding the signings dealt with a third bill — mandating automated sprinklers for about 150 buildings — that has yet to be passed by the City Council.

All three bills were introduced in response to the July fire at the Marco Polo condominium tower, which resulted in the death of four people and left scores of units unlivable. Fire officials said the blaze would not have spread so quickly if the building had sprinklers.

“There’s no substitute for an automated fire sprinkler,” Fire Chief Manuel Neves said. “A fire sprinkler works 24 hours a day. Whether you’re in the house, at home, not at home, in the shower, it’s continually on guard vigilantly watching over your possessions and your family members.

“Having a sprinkler system even beats living next to a fire station,” Neves said. “It would be impossible for that fire station to get there in the amount of time that a fire sprinkler could be activated and either extinguish the fire or suppress the fire to a point where the Fire Department will come into a safer environment.”

The two bills Caldwell signed Thursday:

>> [Bill 101 \(2017\)](#) gives condominium and apartment owners a property tax credit of up to \$2,000 if they install sprinklers in their own units or pay a share for building-wide hallways or other common areas. Only those who receive homeowner exemptions, or owner-occupants, will be eligible for the

credit.

>> [Bill 102 \(2017\)](#) gives condominium and apartment owners waivers on fees they otherwise would need to pay the city for plan reviews and building permits associated with the installation of automated sprinkler systems. A project with a value of \$1 million, for instance, would typically pay \$10,000 in fees.

“This was a disaster of sizable proportions, and I know that all of us in this room ... never want to see something like this happen again,” Caldwell said.

Fire officials estimate it would cost each individual property owner between \$8,000 and \$22,000 to retrofit with sprinklers in an entire building, including each dwelling unit, and between \$5,000 and \$10,000 each if only common areas got the upgrade.

There are about 368 residential towers, totaling between 38,000 and 39,000 living units, without sprinklers. All are buildings constructed before 1975, when the city first mandated that all new residential high-rises must have sprinklers.

Caldwell urged Council members to pass [Bill 69 \(2017\)](#), which as currently written would make it mandatory for the owners of about 150 of the nonsprinkler condominium towers to install systems at least in hallways and other common areas.

Incentives are good, he said, “but without some requirements to actually impel people to retrofit their building, it’s very slow going or maybe no going whatsoever, and ... people remain at risk, both our firefighters and those in high-rise units.”

The 150 towers would be those deemed most vulnerable by the Fire Department.

The bill has received two of three approvals from the full Council and had

been projected to receive a final pass through the Executive Matters and Legal Affairs Committee next week. That meeting, however, was canceled due to uncertainty over Council leadership. Councilman Ernie Martin is slated to replace Ron Menor as Council chairman at a meeting Monday.

Condominium and apartment owners who would be affected under the plan have raised objections, arguing that forcing them to install sprinkler systems is unnecessary and could cost them to lose their homes because of the high costs involved.

Jane Sugimura, president of the Hawaii Council of Associations of Apartment Owners, applauded the signing of the two incentive bills.

However, she said, she and other members of the Residential Fire Safety Advisory Committee, formed to evaluate fire safety laws following the Marco Polo tragedy, want the bill amended to allow condominium owners to opt out of installing sprinklers in buildings where more than 50 percent of owners agree not to put them in.

Under the plan, buildings where owners agreed to not install common-area sprinklers would need to put up signs in public areas informing people they do not have sprinklers, Sugimura said. Sales documents also would need to disclose that information.

Honolulu Fire Department Battalion Chief Socrates Bratakos said, however, that HFD's position will continue to be that the buildings be required to have sprinklers in common areas.