

Key senator vows to smother bill toughening smoke-detector law

By Dan Bernard
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INDIANAPOLIS — State representatives wanted to put teeth into Indiana's smoke detector law this year, passing legislation that imposed heavy fines and prison time for violators. But the idea was just snuffed out in the state Senate.

Sen. Dorothy "Sue" Landske, R-Cedar Lake, said yesterday she will suppress a bill that would have imposed stiff penalties on landlords who knowingly fail to install smoke detectors in their rental properties.

With Landske's decision, landlords who flout the law will face the same punishment under the 1991 smoke detector law: a \$25 fine, even when a fire results in injury or death.

House Bill 1049 proposed to increase the penalty to a maximum \$10,000 fine, and, if a landlord's knowing failure to install a smoke detector led to serious injury or death, up to 3 years in prison. Those match the current penalties for smoke-detector violations in hotels and motels. The House passed the



State Sen. Landske

bill in January.

Landske said she chairs the committee on Corrections, Criminal and Civil Procedures, is too busy with other legislation to consider HB 1049 before this week's deadline. The committee was scheduled to consider two other bills this afternoon in its

final meeting of the session.

But Landske said she was also hesitant to impose penalties that some landlords view as harsh. Landske sympathizes because she owns two rental houses in Cedar Lake.

The Apartment Association, which represents landlords, testified in support of the bill in the House. But Landske said an association lobbyist later told her the bill's provisions were too harsh.

Supporters were disappointed by Landske's move.

"People are dying out there due to slumlords that don't put in smoke detectors," said Indiana State Fire Marshal Tracy Boatwright. Boatwright pushed the 1991 law requiring smoke detectors; this was the first year he sought to increase the penalties.

Rep. J. Jeff Hays, D-Evansville, was among eight representatives who opposed the bill, authored by Rep. Katherine Willing, R-Lebanon. Hays said increasing smoke-detector violations to a felony would strain Indiana's already overcrowded prison system.