

Testimony of Thomas J. Smyth, CEcD
Before the
House Committee on Human Services and Housing
And
House Committee on Health
Thursday, February 7, 2008
8:45 am Room 329
on
HB 2120 Relating to Multi-Unit Residential Buildings

Chairs Shimabukuro and Green, Vice Chairs Rhoads and Mizuno, and
Members of the Committees:

I have many concerns with implementation of the mandate in HB 2120 that requires a survey of those with medical or mobility concerns related to evacuation from a residential building. The bill also requires development and posting of a building evacuation plan.

I recently retired from the Department of Business, Economic Development & Tourism but my testimony today as an individual is based on over 20 years as the department Civil Defense Coordinator and member of the Hawaii State Emergency Response Commission (HSERC) attached to DOH. I am also a member of the Board of Directors of an AOA in the downtown area.

Many buildings have a resident manager who monitors new residents and informally asks if they need special assistance in the event of a mandatory evacuation or a long-term power outage. In our building we list apartment numbers and names of those who may need evacuation or other assistance and simply put the list in the fire access lock box outside our main entrance. All HFD vehicles have a key to unlock the box and allow use of a building entry key kept in the box. While all public safety personnel do not have a lock box key, the usual reason for a large-scale evacuation is a building fire. The appropriate response to most natural disasters is to “shelter in place” and to not leave the building.

Such a survey as described in this bill is clearly complex. The proper wording of questions is vital if results are to be of any use. If a survey is mandated, emergency response and health officials should standardize the survey questions so that it is meaningful and the results are in the same language from building to building. I believe that the survey contained in this bill is very intrusive and would not be completed by most residents. This would deny public safety personnel the most important information relating to those who may need some help with evacuation mobility or emergency power during a prolong outage.

As for the evacuation plan and diagram, it is certainly possible to prepare and post it for most buildings, if they have not already done so. In this bill the plan is mandatory but no one is charged with verifying that it has been done. It is unenforceable unless public safety officials, usually Fire Marshals, are charged with verifying that the plan is adequate and posted. But there are still no penalties for not complying.

HB 2120 deals with important and urgent issues, but I urge you to amend it to address the very real problems I have noted if it is to provide the safety that is intended.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony.