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ARCHITECTS, PUBLIC SAFETY LEADERS OPPOSE INTERIOR DESIGNER LICENSURE BILL

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STATE HOUSE, BOSTON, JULY 10, 2007...Seizing on a federal report finding "insufficient understanding among designers and builders" to be one of the problems that led to the fatal Big Dig tunnel collapse a year ago, architects today blasted a proposal that would allow interior designers to obtain license, work more independently from architects, and bid on state contracts.

According to George Bachrach, a past board member of the Boston Society of Architects (BSA) who spoke against a bill filed by Sen. Cynthia Creem (D-Newton) during a Committee on Consumer Protection and Professional Licensure hearing, the tragedy in the I-90 tunnel connector last summer was in part due to a lack of central authority over the project execution. Bachrach urged members to oppose the bill that interior designers say would give consumers access to professional designers who meet minimum competency standards.

"If this is a mere turf battle, why would fire chiefs oppose this piece of legislation? Where does your public safety begin and end?" said Bachrach, a former Democratic state senator and gubernatorial candidate who is president of the Watertown-based public relations firm Bachrach & Co.

At today's hearing, International Association of Fire Chiefs President Bob DiPoli said the Fire Chiefs of Massachusetts and building officials oppose Creem's bill. "The chiefs are concerned with the lack of depth of training and knowledge of the designers," said DiPoli.

Bachrach joined a panel of architects who pushed for another piece of legislation that would grant designers a certification as opposed to a license. According to BSA President Hubert Murray, granting licensure to interior designers would hold them accountable for "public safety, health and welfare."

"In the building industry, life safety is protected by the well-worked-out interplay between the architectural and engineering registration laws and the state building code," said Murray.

Murray said legislation filed by Rep. Martin Walsh (D-Dorchester) would certify "qualified" interior designers and allow them to "distinguish themselves in the marketplace without confusing and costly governmental regulation and without compromising public safety."

Under Creem's bill, those who wish to be part of a Board of Registration of Interior Designers to acquire a license would have to pass an examination by the National Council of Interior Design Qualifications, have experience in interior design and graduate from an interior design program. The license would allow designers to submit plans to building departments for permits without having to go through an architect or another licensed professional and allow them to bid on

contracts. Currently, there is no law in the state pertaining to interior designers.

"The bill would allow interior designers to practice to the fullest extent of their capabilities," said Deanna Waldron, director of government and public affairs of the American Society of Interior Designers.

But according to Jay Wickersham, BSA secretary, the examination for interior designers under the bill is significantly less comprehensive than the Architectural Registration Examination, which licensed architects are required to take.

Cheryl Durst, executive vice president and chief executive officer of the International Interior Design Association, said consumers would benefit from Creem's proposal because they would have access to a resource of reliable professional interior designers who would have to meet "standards of minimum competency."

Rose Mary Botti-Salitsky, president of the Massachusetts Interior Design Coalition, said registration and licensure of interior designers are in the public interest. She said she was in a "state of shock" when she heard the Fire Chiefs Association of Massachusetts opposed the designers' licensure bill. Botti-Salitsky said the fire chiefs would not have a "face to face" with her to talk about their point of view.

"We have great academic institutions in the Commonwealth, we want to recruit them and yet we are not recognizing them as professionals," Botti-Salitsky said.

Committee Co-Chair Sen. Michael Morrissey (D-Quincy) said the ultimate decision his committee will have to make is whether to give interior designers certification or license.

According to the committee, the designers-backed legislation was first proposed in 2003 and it died in the now obsolete Committee on Government Regulations. In 2006, the bill died in the committee.