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Asbestos surveys before demolitions will protect neighborhood health

SB 705 will help with onslaught of demolitions from metro area's housing boom

SALEM – The Senate approved legislation this morning that will help protect the safety of neighborhoods from demolition of older buildings that may contain asbestos. Senate Bill 705 requires the Oregon Department of Environmental Quality to adopt rules requiring contractors to perform a survey to determine whether a residence is insulated with asbestos prior to beginning demolition. This will allow for steps to be taken against exposure to asbestos when a building is demolished, protecting the health of neighboring households.

“The legislation addresses a growing concern: The toxics present in older homes that are being demolished to make way for new development. It’s an issue in many neighborhoods in inner Portland,” said Senator Michael Dembrow (D-Portland), chief sponsor of the bill. “We have a situation that is not safe for our neighborhoods. Homes built prior to 1990 have a high potential of containing asbestos materials and when demolitions occur, this can pose public health risks to neighbors. This is a small, but concrete, first step toward addressing the larger issues around residential demolitions.”

Currently, regulations around mitigation of asbestos and lead paint are split between different state agencies, and focus more on renovations than they do on demolition. There is also a lack of oversight for single-family homes that needs to be corrected. According to testimony submitted in support of SB 705, the City of Portland has approved over 750 residential demolition permits in the last three years. With many of these houses built before 1950, it is highly likely that building materials in many of these residences contain asbestos. Building demolition can create asbestos dust, exposing neighbors to a serious health hazard.

“Anyone driving around Portland can see that our housing market has rebounded and construction is growing. However, there are legitimate concerns about how we are building and how this is affecting the livability and safety of our neighborhoods,” said Senate Majority Leader Diane Rosenbaum (D-Portland). “This is simple public health measure we can take to protect our changing communities.”

Asbestos is the name given to a number of naturally occurring fibrous minerals that are highly durable and heat resistant. Due to these properties, asbestos has often been used in construction materials such as roofing shingles, insulation, and cement siding. No amount of contact with asbestos is safe and exposure increases the risk of developing lung cancer, asbestosis (disease of lungs), and mesothelioma.

SB 705 will now go to the House of Representatives for consideration.

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