Assemblyman Robert K. Sweeney

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Assembly Bill To Ban “Killer Couches”

“The fire just laughs at it.” This is how leading fire scientist Vytenis Babrauskas described the effectiveness of fire retardant foam, used in furniture, to the Chicago Tribune. The Chicago Tribune article also went on to point out that “A typical American baby is born with the highest recorded concentrations of flame retardants among infants in the world.”

These flame retardant chemicals were added in response to a 1975 California flammability standard, TB 117, which was developed in part due to concerns about the large number of cigarette fires that were started in homes.

“We know more than ever about the potential health effects posed by flame retardants. Now that we know how ineffective they are, there is no justification to use them at all in our homes and furniture,” According to Assemblyman Bob Sweeney, the Chairman of the Assembly Committee on Environmental Conservation.

“Children are especially sensitive to exposure to dangerous chemicals. We must apply common sense and refuse to add chemicals which represent real health risks and do not provide any practical safety benefit,” Sweeney added.

Sweeney has introduced new legislation (A.6557) that would ban the use of chemical flame retardants in residential upholstered furniture. “We need to take steps to protect the public who are exposed to these chemicals on a daily basis, and we need to protect the firefighters who are exposed to a whole cocktail of chemicals when they arrive to put out the fire,” Sweeney said.

Exposure to toxic flame retardants have been linked to real and measurable health impacts. Women with higher levels of flame retardants in their blood have smaller babies. Children exposed in the womb have lower IQs and attention problems. Other studies have linked flame retardants to male infertility, birth defects, and early puberty. A recent study in animals has linked toxic flame retardants to autism and obesity.

The legislation would also require residential upholstered furniture sold in New York to comply with an open flame standard. “Now that we have the Fire Safe Cigarette law in place there is less risk from smolder fire, but although there are fewer fires caused by open flames such as candles, these fires tend to be deadlier,” Sweeney said. “Having an open flame standard in place will help ensure that people have a chance to escape safely and will help prevent furniture from contributing fuel to the fire,” he added.

The legislation is supported by the Firemen’s Association of the State of New York, The New York State Volunteer Ambulance and Rescue Association, The New York Lawyers for the Public Interest, Clean and Healthy New York, and Environmental Advocates of New York. It has been designated as an issue of united concern for the Association of Fire Districts, NYS Association of Fire Chiefs, NYS Fire Marshals and Inspectors Association, County Fire Coordinators Association and the Volunteer Fire Police Association.

The legislation is expected to be taken up before the Assembly during Earth Day proceedings this week.