

## **Massachusetts to start regulating sheet metal workers** *Proposed state rules would drive up costs, opponents say*

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BOSTON — A new state board is poised to approve controversial rules for the sheet metal industry that supporters say would improve public safety and critics say would drive up construction costs.

Proponents and opponents packed hearings on the issue that the Board of Examiners of Sheet Metal Workers held in Quincy, Malden and Springfield earlier this month.

The state Legislature created the board in response to a 2007 fire at a Chinese restaurant in West Roxbury that killed two Boston firefighters. Faulty duct work was found to have caused the fire.

The new board was charged with crafting a licensing process for sheet metal workers. However, non-union contractors loudly complained that Gov. Deval Patrick stacked the majority of the seats on the seven-member board with union representatives or union-friendly businessmen.

George Weber, the director of Patrick's Division of Professional Licensure, said every effort was made to appoint a balanced board. Weber said the new rules would require thousands of sheet metal workers to be licensed for the first time.

The board is next scheduled to discuss the new rules at a meeting on Friday. Weber said the board members are carefully considering the comments that have been submitted and will strive to approve a balanced and fair set of standards.

Much of the controversy about the proposed rules has focused on ratios that would be established for construction projects. The new rules would require at least three experienced sheet-metal workers for every one apprentice sheet-metal worker on a commercial construction job that is bigger than 35,000 cubic feet and has more than two sheet metal workers. A one-to-one ratio would be required for residential projects and smaller commercial projects.

Ivan Quinchia, general manager at sheet-metal distributor Air Purchases Inc. in Burlington, said the three-to-one ratio will significantly drive up construction costs because journeymen and master sheet-metal workers are paid at a much higher rate than apprentices. He said the ratio could cause many smaller sheet metal contractors to cut jobs or close down.

Quinchia also said he supports licensing and training requirements, but the training standards spelled out in the proposed rules are excessive.

Meanwhile, union representatives argue that these standards are about ensuring construction safety standards – and not protecting union jobs.

"It shouldn't be a union or non-union issue," said Neal Kelleher, of Sheet Metal Workers Local 17 in Dorchester. "It's about regulating a trade and educating a trade."