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CONTACT:

Kathryn Rodgers, Silent Spring Institute, rodgers@silentspring.org, 617-332-4288, x225

Elizabeth Saunders, Clean Water Action, esaunders@cleanwater.org, 617-338-8131 x203

Boston changes fire code to allow furniture free of flame retardants in public spaces

New bill protects public from exposure to toxic chemicals, reflecting growing demand nationwide for flame retardant-free furniture.

BOSTON, Mass. (Wednesday, March 23, 2016)—Boston City Councilors passed a bill today to amend the city's Fire Prevention Code, allowing hospitals, schools, colleges, and other public buildings with sprinkler systems to use furniture free of toxic flame retardant chemicals.

“This bill protects people from needless exposure to harmful flame retardants, creating a safer and healthier environment for all those who live, work, serve, and learn in our great city,” says **Josh Zakim, City Councilor representing district 8, who sponsored the bill.** The bill also brings Boston in line with the Massachusetts Fire Code's regulation for upholstered furniture, as well as other major cities across the country that have taken steps to reduce the use of these toxic chemicals.

Until today, Boston was the only major city in the U.S. that enforced a decades-old flammability standard, called TB 133, with no exceptions for buildings equipped with automatic sprinklers. The vast majority of manufacturers can only meet TB 133 by adding large amounts of flame retardant chemicals to furniture. In contrast, other places in the country, including the rest of Massachusetts, follow a newer flammability standard that does not necessitate the use of flame retardants in furniture. In addition, there are other non-toxic ways to achieve fire safety, such as the use of sprinkler systems, smoke detectors, and smoking bans.

The bill, passed by a unanimous vote and awaiting signature by Mayor Marty Walsh, received widespread support from healthcare leaders, advocates, firefighters, students, and other groups concerned about the health effects associated with exposure to these chemicals. “I applaud Boston City Councilors for considering public health as well as public safety,” says **Kathryn Rodgers, a staff scientist at Silent Spring Institute.** “Our research has shown that flame retardant chemicals migrate out of furniture into the air and dust, and ultimately people's bodies, putting people's health at risk.” Studies have linked exposure to flame retardants with cancer, thyroid disruption, low birth weight, lowered IQ, fertility problems, and many other health issues.

The bill's passing is also welcome news for Boston Fire Fighters Local 718, who along with firefighters across the state and throughout the nation have been advocating for less toxic fire safety methods.

Firefighters are especially vulnerable to flame retardants since large amounts of the chemicals are released into the air during a fire. Cancer rates among firefighters in Boston are significantly higher than they are among the city's other residents.

"This is an important step toward protecting people from exposure to dangerous chemicals that we know are associated with increased cancer risk," says **Margo Simon Golden, board president of the Massachusetts Breast Cancer Coalition**, which focuses on breast cancer prevention.

The bill now gives schools, colleges, hospitals and other large institutions the green light to purchase flame retardant-free furniture. **John Messervy, corporate director of design and construction at Partners HealthCare**, praised the City Council for its decision. "These fire retardants are not safe and do not belong in a healthcare environment," says Messervy. Also, as the furniture industry has begun to move away from manufacturing furniture treated with chemicals, furniture containing flame retardants comes at a premium. "For Partners Healthcare, that premium amounts to millions of dollars in added costs per year," he says.

"The city made the right choice today in adopting a new flammability standard," says **Elizabeth Saunders, Massachusetts director of Clean Water Action** and coordinator of the Alliance for a Healthy Tomorrow. "The passage of this important bill will protect millions of people from these dangerous chemicals."

Efforts to phase out flame retardants continue at the state level. In Massachusetts, two bills—which were reported favorably out of the Committee on Public Health and the Committee on Public Safety last week—would require manufacturers and retailers to phase out the use of certain flame retardants in children's products and residential upholstered furniture. "Both bills will need continued support through the legislative process in order to become law, so we urge the Massachusetts legislature to follow the lead of the city of Boston in being proactive about reducing flame retardant exposures in our everyday lives," says Saunders.

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***Silent Spring Institute** is the leading scientific research organization specifically dedicated to understanding the link between chemicals in our everyday environments and human health, with a focus on cancer prevention. For more information, visit www.silentspring.org.*

***Alliance for a Healthy Tomorrow** is a coalition of over 100 public health, labor, environmental, faith based, civic, health care, parent and other organizations in Massachusetts working to prevent harm to human health and the environment from toxic chemicals. www.healthytomorrow.org*

***Clean Water Action** was founded during the campaign to pass the landmark Clean Water Act in 1972, and since then, it has worked to win strong health and environmental protections by bringing issue expertise, solution-oriented thinking, and people power to the table. www.cleanwateraction.org*