

## Residential Real Estate

### Interior Design License Initiative Gaining Steam

Boston Society of Architects Backs Licensing Proposal; American Institute of Architects Stands Opposed to Plan  
By [Aglaia Pikounis](#)

When hundreds of interior designers gather at the World Trade Center in Boston tomorrow for a conference and trade show, they'll learn about the latest trends and best business practices from experts in the field.

A topic not on the agenda, but surely on the minds of some participants, will be ongoing efforts to have interior designers in Massachusetts licensed.

For about two decades, interior designers in the Bay State have unsuccessfully tried to get legislation passed that would require the licensing or registration of interior designers. A recently filed bill, however, appears to be picking up some momentum, according to some designers, and gaining the support of architects who have long opposed the licensing of interior designers.

Supporters say that licensing is needed because designers' work directly affects the public's health, safety and welfare. Citing examples like the nightclub fire in West Warwick, R.I., that killed 100 people last year, designers say that improper design and the use of faulty materials can have devastating effects. Legislation requiring the proper training and licensing of interior designers would help prevent such tragedies.

"It's a consumer protection issue," said David D. Stone, an interior designer with Sasaki Assoc. in Watertown and a member of the Massachusetts Interior Design Coalition, which has been working to get the legislation passed. "The work that we do on both a residential and commercial level definitely affects the consumer."

Licensing would also have tangible benefits for designers. Interior designers who are licensed by the state would be able to bid on state projects. Since interior designers are currently not recognized as registered design professionals in Massachusetts, they must work with a licensed engineer or architect to submit a proposal for a state project.

"We are restricted from certain projects," said Jean Verbridge, a principal of Siemasko & Verbridge in Beverly and chairwoman of the Massachusetts Interior Design Coalition. "[For] any state-solicited request for proposal we cannot, as an interior designer, go on our own and submit a proposal."



Interior design professionals are slated to gather at Boston's World Trade Center (above) this week for a conference and trade show. Meanwhile, a bill that would require interior designers in Massachusetts is garnering increased support.

Some interior designers in the state have graduated from an accredited design program and 411 Bay State interior designers have passed the National Council for Interior Design Qualification, or NCIDQ, exam, according to the council. But currently there are no certification requirements for designers.

“Right now, to the public, there is absolutely nothing that differentiates someone who is qualified to practice interior design from someone who just has a flair for decorating,” said Verbridge.

The proposed bill would require interior designers who want to be “registered” to earn a professional design degree from a four-year program accredited by the Foundation for Interior Design Education Research, or FIDER. In addition, they would have to complete an internship under the guidance of a certified interior designer and pass the NCIDQ exam. A licensing board would be established to handle complaints against designers and to create rules and regulations.

People and firms that offer design or decorating services could still continue to provide those services but they could not refer to or advertise themselves as registered interior designers.

“We are trying to be incredibly inclusive but at the same time say you have to be qualified to do this,” said Kathleen Vick, a Newton designer who is the MIDC legislative director.

Vick worked on the latest round of the bill, and communicated with a Boston Society of Architects task force that has been studying the licensing issue. Vick and her colleagues hired a lobbyist and convinced state Rep. Peter J. Koutoujian, a Democrat from Newton, to file a licensing bill in November 2002.

The designers’ grassroots efforts have started to pay off as the proposed legislation has won broader support than in the past. Attempts to have interior designers licensed have been resisted over the last few years by architects and large furniture stores, which viewed such measures as a threat to their own business.

“It’s basically a turf issue,” acknowledged Duncan Pendlebury, a member of the BSA task force and president of Jung/Brannen Assoc., an architectural firm in Boston.

Over the years, architectural firms have built very large and successful design departments within their companies. But because interior design is not a licensed profession, the designers working in those departments were excluded from becoming partners of the companies. “There’s only so far that interior designers can go in these firms,” said one designer.

Successful designers have started their own firms and formed alliances with architects and engineers in order to have their plans “stamped” or approved by licensed professionals.

Some architects in Massachusetts who previously were opposed to the legislation have started to see that the licensing or registration of interior designers may be unavoidable, as more and more states have recognized designers as professionals. Today, 24 states, including Connecticut and New York, have some form of interior design licensing or registration laws.

“I believe and hope that they’re [architects] really starting to see us as a team,” said Vick. “I really think that architects are starting to understand that a team is only as strong as its weakest link and that they want a strong

team. They understand that an unqualified interior designer makes for a weak team.”

### **Not All on Board**

In Massachusetts, the Joint Committee on Government Regulations is still studying the latest draft of the licensing legislation. Before the bill was even filed, interior designers worked with the BSA task force to draft legislation of which both approved. Many of the major concerns that the BSA raised about four years ago were addressed in the legislation, according to Pendlebury.

Among them was a request for clearer language enabling architects to continue to practice interior design without being required to be a registered interior designer, said Pendlebury. In addition, architects wanted a “much more restricted grandfathering process,” said Pendlebury, so that even designers with significant experience would have to pass at least some part of the NCIDQ exam.

Last month, the BSA task force had a public meeting and offered a few more changes that were presented to the legislative committee for consideration. Despite the support of the BSA, there are architects who “are still not happy” about the legislative proposal, said Pendlebury.

The American Institute of Architects, which represents the interests of 70,000 licensed architects and allied professionals, has decided to oppose practice legislation for interior designers.

At a meeting last September, the AIA board reaffirmed its position on the professional licensure and regulation of designers. “The AIA board recognized the contribution of interior designers as valued colleagues while acknowledging there is no current justification to support a change in existing policies. Maintaining the protection of public health, safety and welfare is the primary reason for licensing,” according to a statement provided to Banker & Tradesman.

The statement continues, “Beyond considering the extensive input from its members and component organizations across the country, the AIA examined the state of existing credentialing programs and standards relevant to interior design. It also reviewed available state governmental assessments of existing interior design regulatory programs. The AIA board concluded that current education, experience and examination requirements for interior designers do not meet necessary thresholds for the imperative role of a regulated profession, implicit in state licensing laws, to protect public health, safety and welfare.”

Pendlebury and other BSA members, however, believe architects should play a role in crafting legislation that is likely to emerge in the future.

“You can stick your head in the sand and pretend that it’s not [going to happen] or you can become active and participate in the process of creating the legislation so that you can be assured that the professional community is working at the highest possible standards,” said Pendlebury.

“Our feeling here is ... that we need to participate in this, and the interior design profession needs to be setting the bar for qualifications as high as they can,” he said.