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Florida Panel Mulls Insurance Discounts

By **DAVID ROYSE** Associated Press Writer
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TALLAHASSEE, Fla. — Insurance companies may have to spell out standardized premium discounts homeowners would get for certain home improvements under a recommendation discussed Thursday by a Florida state panel.

The Property and Casualty Insurance Reform Committee is trying to figure out what to do about the problem of availability and affordability of hurricane insurance in the state.

Most homeowners insurers give discounts for improvements that are likely to help avoid damages, such as hurricane shutters or roof improvements. More home "hardening" — making houses better able to withstand storms — has been tabbed by Gov. Jeb Bush and other officials as a key step to solving Florida's insurance problem.

Insurance has become unaffordable for many homeowners, with premiums more than doubling for many in the last few years as Florida has been hit by seven hurricanes and forecasters have warned the state to brace for more active seasons.

People like Leona DelMonaco, who lives in Hollywood and saw her annual premium jump from \$1,733 to \$5,945, say something has to be done.

"When I got the (bill) I flipped," DelMonaco said. "Where am I going to come up with this kind of money? Somebody out there has to listen ... we need help."

Many homeowners have complained that the discounts aren't enough, and it's not clear what kind of a break they would actually get if they spent hundreds or thousands of dollars on improvements.

The committee was asked by Bush to try to come up with solutions. It discussed the possibility of setting industrywide standards that would tell consumers at least a range of possible percentage reductions to their bill if they make certain improvements, such as replacing their garage door with a sturdier one, or getting non-breakable glass windows.

While the panel didn't write a recommendation with any standards for what such discounts would be, several members said consumers clearly want more information about what they might save.

"I think you've heard a consensus of (setting) at least a minimum that companies would give," said Lt. Gov.

Toni Jennings, the chairwoman of the panel.

But insurers say that if a standard discount is required, it has to be based on scientific evidence that improvements would reduce claims by a certain amount.

"We're not opposed to standardization of these mitigation discounts, (but) we would caution trying to make them as actuarially sound as possible," said Phil Lawson, president of Allstate Floridian Insurance, a division of Allstate Corp., and a member of a technical advisory group that is providing advice to the panel.

Insurers say it would be impossible to set a particular dollar amount for various improvements for every customer, because other factors would affect the person's premium.

The panel is required to have recommendations by Nov. 15. But Jennings said it will likely make proposals sooner than that because Bush is pushing it to work faster.

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