

# City more active in code enforcement

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MONMOUTH — City officials have taken more stringent measures during the past eight months in the way they monitor building code violations and respond to problems with apartments and rental units.

The city included a fierer in its utility bills last fall — to coincide with the annual influx of new students at Western Oregon University — that detailed tenant rights and the procedures needed to resolve housing complaints.

At the end of January, Monmouth's building department hired a half-time employee to assist in making certain local buildings are in compliance with the city's building codes.

And in the coming months, city staff will conduct routine follow-up inspections of properties that have received city requests for repairs, said City Manager Jim Hough.

"We had a desire to get better at what we do, as far as nuisance abatement and code enforce-

ment," Hough said of the improvements.

There were two primary reasons for the increased attention to building issues in recent months, Hough said.

Officials hired code enforcement officer Roberto Rios because of the amount of residential construction and remodeling in the city during the past few years.

"It's something we've wanted to do for a long time," he said.

Keeping tenant-landlord problems to a minimum is the other factor, Hough said.

Almost 1,500 of the city's 2,757 housing units are rented, according to the 2000 U.S. Census.

Oregon's Tenant-Landlord Act requires that a rental be maintained in a "habitable and livable condition." It is through normal landlord inspections or a report from a tenant that repairs get made; there is no state agency assigned to enforce these rules.

Municipal governments are restricted from enacting the law,

but can resolve issues through their building and fire codes.

But "we respond to complaints," Hough said. "When we get one, we investigate."

Veronica Huerta of the Monmouth-Independence Tenants Union (MITU) said most renters are college students who are uninformed on how to resolve a problem, and as a result often do not speak out.

MITU and city officials coordinated in 2002 on a code violation checklist, a copy of which can be picked up at City Hall.

Building inspector Larry Thomson said follow-up inspections will occur after the building comes into compliance with previous repair requests.

The Four Seasons Apartments complex at 350 E. Powell is one of the first properties in the city to go through the process. MITU members toured the 20-unit complex and encouraged some of its residents in February to file complaints with the city. Issues included water leaking from second-story bathrooms through the ceilings below, and

garbage from overflowing dumpsters.

Building officials identified more than 30 violations, each punishable by a fine of up to \$500 for every day they went unmitigated.

Four Seasons owner Dave Adams said many of the tenants in the problem units never approached him with concerns. He said he has paid almost \$2,000 to comply with all of the city's requests.

"I don't think (the building) is in bad shape," he said, although "it's a 30-year old building that is in need of more maintenance than a brand new one."

"If there is a problem of any type that a tenant perceives, I ask them to call me, and I fix it."

Adams added that he supported the city's recent efforts to mitigate rental complaints.

"I think the (follow-up) inspections are an excellent idea," he said. "If areas need to be fixed, let's fix them."

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