

Pest control move blow to poor

Activist Susan Eagle says cutting back on enforcement voids attempts by people in low-income housing to achieve decent standards.



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A recommendation by London's planning and development department to cut investigations into complaints of pest infestation is just "one more nail in the coffin" of tenants who live in low-income housing, says one tenant activist.

Rev. Susan Eagle, chairperson of the London housing advisory committee, says the recommendation chips away at the attempts of low-income tenants to achieve decent housing. "For people trying to live in any kind of affordable housing, this just becomes another huge issue," she says.

Eagle says it's "unbelievable" that the city would consider eliminating investigations. "It's part of municipal government to provide standards, and then to enforce standards for any kind of quality of living."

Vic Cote, commissioner of planning and development, says he recommended cutting three positions — a planner, a bylaw enforcement officer and a property standards officer — to hold the department's line on spending.

ALTERNATIVES: Cote says that before the recommendation goes to council, he will present a report in which he plans to lay out alternatives to the community and protective services committee in February.

"If they decide that they still want pest infestation looked at, they have to find some other source of revenue in our budget, or direct me to cut some other expenditure," he says.

Eagle suggests that fining landlords who are delinquent in dealing with pest infestations would allow the city to recoup the costs of enforcing the bylaw, as well as reduce the numbers of delinquent landlords.

"They have to put more teeth in it (the bylaw), not fewer teeth in it," she says.

Jeff Schlemmer, a lawyer with Neighbourhood Legal Services in London, says that in slum accommodations where landlords don't respond quickly to infestations, the city's enforcement of the bylaw has protected tenants; without bylaw enforcement, there is no other legislation to cover pest infestation.

"They (the city) are the last game in town," he says. "It's where the landlord doesn't take action that it's extremely important to have this regulation."

But Bill Amos, president of the London Property Management Association, says he doubts the city's proposed move to stop investigating pest complaints will have any negative ramifications on tenants.

"I know from my own experience that if you don't answer the tenants' needs, in this market there are too many other places they can move to. I don't see it having a large effect," he says.

In addition, he says the majority of landlords have a monthly contract with a pest control service to take care of any problems.

BLAME TENANTS: Eagle, however, disputes claims that most landlords will take action once they realize they have a pest problem. "It's true that good landlords don't want pests, and bad landlords don't care," she says. "Bad landlords basically blame the tenants."

Eagle says that without enforcement of the bylaw, tenants in the Cheyenne Avenue apartment complex wouldn't have had any hope of resolving their problems with cockroaches in 1992. She recalls one Cheyenne tenant who said her two babies cried at night because cockroaches were crawling over their faces.

Tenants who spray their own apartments to combat cockroaches are doomed to failure, Eagle says; treating them requires a landlord's co-operation, since they travel throughout an entire building.

Cote says he feels that investigating unsafe conditions such as faulty stairs, railings and balconies is a greater priority than investigating pest infestations. "Pest infestation is not an unsafe condition. It's a nuisance," he says.

Eagle's advice to tenants who are experiencing a pest-related problem is to call the property standards department now. "Let the city know just how important it is, and just how significant the problem is in the city," she says.