

July 2, 2004

Fire codes may stall dorm openings;
Single inspector must tackle large load. City working on problem.

By Chuck Ayers Of The Morning Call

In six weeks, Lehigh University students will trundle their laptops, televisions and lava lamps back to campus and school officials hope all their rooms will be ready.

The installation of sprinklers in five fraternity houses and one residence hall is running about two weeks behind schedule, mostly because Bethlehem has only one fire inspector, who is inundated with inspections.

"It was tough to get inspectors," said Steven Schlegel, Lehigh's assistant director of facilities services. "It's been holding us up."

The inspectors enforce fire safety codes during construction. The codes must be met before work -- including installation of fire sprinklers -- can continue. If inspectors are unavailable, work can be delayed.

Mayor John Callahan said his office has fielded phone calls from developers who said they called the city for a fire inspector and were told it would be a three-week wait.

"I get concerned when we get these calls," Callahan said. "I don't want to hear that. It holds up the whole job and it holds up taxes."

With new businesses and development coming to the city, plus brisk sales of homes and apartments, the city has 2,200 inspections to go through, according to Deputy Fire Commissioner Eugene Novak.

Bethlehem has enough money in its budget for four fire inspectors in the Fire Department.

But with the recent military activation of one inspector to serve Iraq and the return of two others to duty as firefighters, the fire inspections are falling on the shoulders of chief inspector Tom Faldey.

"He's doing it all," said Capt. Richard Zimmerman, the fire inspections coordinator. "He's got to do the job of chief inspector and three field inspectors."

Right now the city can do little about that.

The fire inspectors in Bethlehem must be firefighters with one year of experience. To become an inspector, firefighters must pass a test to become certified and many of those who have passed it don't want the job.

Shifting the work to the code and building inspections team in the Department of Community and Economic Development helps relieve the backlog, but violates the firefighters union contract, which says the work belongs to their bargaining unit.

"It's very important to keep development moving in the city and have our businesses open on time," said Tony Hanna, director of community and economic development. "Our primary concern is keeping the momentum going."

Business administrator Dennis Reichard said the union leaders have expressed concern over the city's actions, but have been cooperating until a plan to restructure the fire inspector position can be hammered out.

"They understand the predicament and they understand we're working on it," Reichard said. Callahan said he wants to make the inspector positions a promotion, giving them a rank of lieutenant.

The result would be a savings in pay as more veteran firefighters would opt for the job of inspector, and added stability.

With slightly more than half of its sprinkler project finished and a deadline looming, Lehigh University officials have gone so far as to make contingency plans to house the students in the Comfort Suites hotel on the South Side.

"That would be very disruptive," Schlegel said. "I think we're going to make it but it's going to be down to the wire."

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