



May 10, 2006

Wilkes-Barre council toughening city's landlord ordinance

WILKES-BARRE — Under a proposed amended ordinance, landlords who have a major code violation like defective wiring, leaking pipes or lack heat, a kitchen sink, a toilet, a bathtub or a shower will automatically fail an inspection.

City council will vote on the amended landlord ordinance on first reading Thursday at 6 p.m. The final vote will be in two weeks, said Assistant Solicitor Bill Vinsko.

"The rental ordinance is a super move," Councilman Bill Barrett said at a work session Tuesday.

The more stringent ordinance amends the point system that the code enforcement department uses when inspecting properties. According to the ordinance, any rental unit in which housing code violations equal or exceed 25 points will be declared a safety hazard and unlivable for tenants.

"In the past, if someone didn't have heat, it might have been only a 10-point violation and that person may have passed the inspection," Vinsko said. "We don't want anyone who doesn't have heat to rent to someone so it's an automatic failure. This will allow us to regulate an apartment and make sure it is habitable."

Under the amended ordinance, landlords who have structurally unsafe exterior walls and chimneys in need of repairs also will fail an inspection. Under the previous ordinance, a rental property may have been a hazard, but the points system prevented it from being shut down, Vinsko said.

"This will make the property safer for not only for the residents, but for the people adjacent to it," Vinsko said.

After the brief work session, council members said they will vote in favor of the amended ordinance.

Councilman Jim McCarthy, who proposed the landlord ordinance, said it will protect children and older people and crack down on slumlords. He also wants the city to hire more inspectors.

"There are so many out-of-town homeowners who buy places to get fast, quick rent. There are no controls over them," McCarthy said. "We shouldn't beat up the poor guy who has to live in a shack. We should beat up the guy who owns it who won't take care of it."

Council Chairman Tony Thomas Jr. said the amended ordinance will push landlords to fix code violations quicker.

"Landlords who do not cooperate do not cooperate no matter what you do to them," Thomas said. "You give them 60 days or 90 days and in two years, they still haven't solved the problem. If you shut them down, they lose their ability to collect rent."

dallabaugh@citizensvoice.com