

Fire Inspection Fees For Rental Units, Low-Rise Hotels And Motels Moving Forward

May Go Before City Council As Early As Next Month

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Long Beach Fire Department representatives met with owners of rental property earlier this month to discuss proposed fire inspection fees, which, if approved, are intended to generate enough revenue to save the jobs of at least three firefighters.

The fees were proposed in September during budget negotiations, but property owners complained they were not given an opportunity for input. The city council directed staff to conduct meetings with impacted owners and return with a proposal.

The original proposal involved implementing an annual citywide \$20 per-unit fire inspection fee for buildings with three or more multi-family residential units under one roof. It would have applied to approximately 6,992 buildings in the city, totaling about 62,370 individual units, according to Rich Brandt, president of the Long Beach Firefighters Association. The fees were supposed to bring in about \$500,000, he said.

The new proposal has two phases and does not include a per-unit fee, but it still applies to about 7,000 multi-family dwellings. It also uses a fee structure based on the number of units in a building.

The fire department is uncertain how much revenue the fees will bring, but Jeff Reeb, deputy chief of operations for the fire department, said the fees are being calculated based on how

much time it takes an inspector to make sure all common areas – including hallways, staircases and laundry rooms – have fire extinguishers. Reeb did say he expected the fees to amount to less than \$500,000.

Inspectors would also check the buildings' utilities and housekeeping and storage facilities for fire hazards, as well as ensure that residents have easy access to exits and fire protection systems such as pull stations, which notify them of an emergency.

Once the proposed fee structure is finalized, it will go to the city council for a vote. Reeb hopes the council can review and approve it in December so the fire department can implement Phase 1 in January 2011, which applies to condominium and apartment buildings with 11 or more units and low-rise motels and hotels (such as the Maya on Queensway Bay, the Marriott Residence Inn on Willow Street and the Golden Sails on Pacific Coast Highway, but not for high rise hotels such as the Hyatt, Westin, etc.). Phase 2 includes buildings with three to 10 units and is planned for January 2012.

At the meeting, property owners expressed concern about some aspects of the inspections. They questioned if the fees would be paid before or after the inspection, whether inspectors would enter the units and if owners must provide a list of tenants to inspectors. Reeb responded that fees would be due after the inspection, inspectors would not enter the units and residents would not provide their names.

“One thing that came up at every meeting was that you can't control what the tenants are doing at any given day, time or moment. I want to make sure that . . . there will be advanced notification to the owner that you're coming out,” said Nancy Ahlswede, executive director of the Apartment Association, California Southern Cities. Reeb said there is no process in place for notifying property owners in advance, but the fire department would consider notifying owners via email.

Ahlswede has spent the past four weeks negotiating with the fire department on the fees. “I am very pleased at the outreach the fire department had on this proposal, and I'm very glad that it's apparent they listened to the concerns we have. Is it perfect solution? No, but I am extremely pleased at the support we got from our opinions,” she said.

She also added, “Another issue is that in this economy, you have to question the public policy decision to put a fee on the residents and stakeholders. The timing isn't real terrific.”

Once in front of the city council, the fire department hopes the apartment industry will support the fees. “Even if you don't support this, I would appreciate it if you could speak and say that at least you were communicated with, and that we engaged you and that we were listening,” Reeb said.

Another meeting to discuss the fees is not expected prior to the recommendation being submitted for city council action. ■