

Alderman to get tough on do-nothing landlords

Higher fines approved, more authority sought

By DAN MAGAZU
dmagazu@manchestexpress.com

City officials say they're sick and tired of dealing with non-compliant landlords, some of whom have been getting away with housing code violations for

over 30 years.

Last night, a committee of aldermen approved raising the fines for building code violations in an attempt to crackdown on city slumlords.

Aldermen also made a motion to urge state lawmakers to change legislation in order to allow the city to take

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control of a property if ordinance fines go unpaid.

During a conversation that lasted for more than an hour, in front of a packed house of interested onlookers, officials recommended that the fines for code violations rise from \$100 to \$200 for a first offense, from \$200 to \$300 for a second offense, and from \$300 to \$500 for a third offense.

The increases were approved by the Committee on Administration and Information Services, and still need approval from the full Board of Mayor and Aldermen.

The higher fines still fall short of those recommended by a committee associated with NeighborWorks Greater Manchester, who wanted the fines to rise even higher.

Some aldermen would also like the city to have the power to take control of a property if an owner shows blatant disregard for compliance, similar to how the city can act if an owner fails to pay property taxes.

"I would like to be able to obtain these properties and redevelop them for affordable housing," Ward 7 Alderman Armand Forest

said.

State legislation would be required for the city to have the power to place a lien on a private property for non-tax obligations.

State Rep. Tony Simon of Manchester, the city's former housing code director, warned officials against raising the code violation fines too high.

"You take the focus off correcting the violation and put it on avoiding the fines,"

"This is going to take more than a compliance officer."

said Simon, who is also an attorney.

Simon suggested the best way to handle the city's compliance problem is to re-establish a housing code department or division.

"This is going to take more than a compliance officer," Simon said.

The city's housing code department was disbanded in 1994.

Will Stewart of NeighborWorks Greater Manchester felt that the committee's decision was a step in the

right direction, despite rejecting some of the group's recommendations.

"We've opened up a can of worms," Stewart said. "We've got people talking about it."

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