

## From the St. Albans Messenger

### Landlord fees: City manager admits an error

Written By Leon Thompson

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#### *Municipal program would create, not add to inspection expenses*

ST. ALBANS CITY — The city manager here is taking full responsibility for misinformation he recently gave to local landlords about charges for inspection of rental dwellings.

Dominic Cloud said he apologizes if he gave the impression at the June 14 city council meeting that the city wants to assume the state's inspection of rental properties because of hikes in state fees.

At that session, Cloud said the state's inspection fee for rental dwellings would jump from \$100 to \$125, starting July 1, but that is not the case, according to Bob Patterson, northwest regional director for the Division of Fire Safety.

The state will not start charging \$125 for rental unit inspections next week, as Cloud reported to aldermen, nor is there a plan to assess a fee.

The city plan, as explained at the recent council meeting, is to assess a fee of \$100 per inspection.

Patterson said the state's inspection fee for electrical codes – a separate process from inspections for rental units – is rising from \$35 to \$125. The change-of-ownership inspection fee is jumping from \$25 to \$125.

"I have no idea where that information came from, but it didn't come from us," said Patterson of the city's numbers regarding a state fee for rental unit inspections.

Asked about his source, Cloud simply said, "City staff provided that information to the council. I take full responsibility, and I'm sorry. Shoot the arrows at me."

However, Cloud explained that the impetus for the city's desire to assume rental unit inspections was not a change in state fees. He said the city needs a higher level of regular, predictable inspections of certain public buildings.

"It needs to be controlled locally," he said. "We need to know that if we inspect a rental property locally, what is the appropriate fee to charge?"

The city's recommendation – its own \$100 fee per inspection – is tough to bear, landlords said at the June 14 meeting.

"It sounds like another tax," said Lee Roscoe, a city landlord who noted that, for most

landlords, the only way to recoup another fee is to raise the rent.

“A lot of my tenants aren’t wealthy, and they won’t be able to afford it,” Roscoe said.

According to the city’s tentative plan, which will likely see changes, the proposed \$100 rental unit inspection fee would only be due every four years, averaging out to \$25 annually per landlord, depending on the number of rental units he owns.

The city has about 1,750 rental units – a staggering amount for a small municipality. Ten Vermont communities, including Winooski in 2003, have adopted locally run fire inspection programs.

Conservatively speaking, the city stands to collect \$50,000 in revenue under the local inspection program, according to Cloud.

Cloud said the city has been working with the state for months on implementing its own inspection process.

Aldermen will meet with Jonathan Wood, director of the Fire Safety Division, during a special meeting scheduled for 6:30 p.m. on Monday, June 28, at city hall.