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# Landlords react to City takeover of inspections

**Written By Leon Thompson**

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## ***Council tables final decision***

ST. ALBANS CITY — Fearing another fiscal burden on themselves and their tenants, a group of landlords here questions whether the city should localize the state inspection process and enact a fee schedule.

About 20 St. Albans City rental property owners packed the city council chambers Monday night to hear about the city's plan to assume responsibility of the inspection program, starting July 1.

On that date, the state's inspection fee for rental dwellings will jump from \$100 to \$125.

City Manager Dominic Cloud said the state's fee hike coincides with the city's shift from a focus on fire suppression to more prevention measures under its departmental restructuring plan.

The city's proposed schedule fee calls for a \$100 inspection – less than the state's upcoming new charge – every four years. There is also a \$50 registration fee per parcel (not per unit) and other associated fees based on code violations.

Fire Marshal Josh Cox, who fielded a barrage of questions from landlords Monday, said the \$100 fee would only be due every four years, so that the city can realistically keep up with its roster of 1,750 rental units – a staggering amount for a small Vermont city.

The City of Winooski adopted a similar program in 2003 and “had great success with it,” Cox said. Winooski's move to municipally organized fire inspections has lessened the city's number of residential fires and reduced the severity of damages and loss, Cox said.

Also, Cox said, some insurance companies have indicated potential benefits to homeowner rates with a local inspection process.

With aldermen's approval, St. Albans City would be the tenth Vermont community to usurp the state's authority over inspections of rental units. The state is retaining jurisdiction of commercial properties.

“By investing in it locally, we'll be able to offer a faster turnaround and probably better service,” Cloud said during Monday's marathon, four-plus-hour council session.

The city stands to collect \$50,000 in revenue under the local inspection program – a conservative estimate, Cloud said.

Naturally, landlords showed concern for having another fee– even though they would have to pay more for an inspection under the state's new fee schedule. Ward 4 Aldermen Joe Luneau sided with them.

“It’s being levied on a class of people that are having a hard time managing their buildings now,” Luneau said.

City landlords such as Doug Jacques, Peter Warden, Bob Cioffi, Kevin Smith, Cheryl Boisenault and more all said a \$100 fee paid every four years might not seem like much, but it is, especially when compounded with potential code violation fees.

“A \$100 bill? I’m agreeable,” said Jacques, of Messenger Street. “A \$500 bill? I think it’s a little steep.”

Cioffi, a St. Albans Town resident who said his city rental properties have not seen one fire call in four decades, called the plan “taxation without representation.” City landlord Lee Roscoe agreed.

“It sounds like another tax,” Roscoe said, noting that, for most landlords, there is only one way to recoup losses sustained from new fees: raise the rent.

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

Smith and Boisenault feared additional fees would lower the values of their rental properties.

Smith also said city landlords are “landlocked on what they can charge for rent,” because they compete with their own federal tax dollars when non-profit groups build affordable housing projects in the city.

“There’s going to be a lot more paper in downtown windows,” Smith said, referring to “For Rent” signs.

After hearing landlords’ concerns, aldermen unanimously decided to table the issue until city administrators design an appeals process, and there is more discussion about whether the proposed fee rate could be lowered.

Ward 3 Alderman Dave Peirce, who made the approved motion, said he supports the local inspection process, because St. Albans City bears an unfair burden of rental properties for the county.

St. Albans City is also the county seat, with the highest population and tax base, and the largest schools.

“We need to look at how much rental property we can sustain,” Peirce said.