

# Ordinance change brings S. Tahoe apartments to code

By Kathryn Reed

Starting July 1 more people in South Lake Tahoe will have a better chance of living in an apartment that meets some basic criteria.

This is because the City Council in December revised the multi-family dwelling ordinance to include complexes with eight or more units. Fifteen-unit complexes had been the minimum at the start, which was then reduced to 12 and now eight. One day it's likely to include properties with four units.

All owners have been sent a letter saying the city is coming for a visit.

Health and safety issues were the impetus for the city to pass the original ordinance in 2004, with inspections starting in November 2005.

"The ordinance is intended to protect the occupant," explained Bill Potts, senior housing inspector for South Lake Tahoe.



Mold at Bart's  
Apartments.  
Photo/South  
Lake Tahoe

Some nasty places have been condemned or overhauled in recent years. Bart's Tahoe apartments on Ski Run Boulevard had five apartments closed on its initial inspection in February 2006.

"Cockroaches were so bad they jumped all over you," Potts said of those 15 units. Mold was so thick it was like a layer of fur. Water damage was forcing ceilings to collapse.

The apartments reopened the next year after the owner practically started from scratch.

The city has the authority to close a structure for health and safety reasons. The landlord must pay for relocation costs and rent/utilities for two months.

The nearby Tahoe Forest Apartments at 1232 Ski Run Blvd. (formerly Heavenly Valley Apartments) also experienced partially collapsed ceilings and signs saying "uninhabitable" on about half the units. The owner has since fixed up the place.

Obviously tenants know they are living in substandard units, but some fear rocking the boat, and language barriers and lack of knowledge about their rights contribute to people staying mum. Plus, South Tahoe renters are more transient in nature, and are often on a month-to-month lease.

"There is a clear link between local property managers – the quality is better compared to absentee owners," Potts said.

With the city inspecting the units each year, problems are going to be found out without anyone having to complain.

The other change with the revised ordinance is exemplary complexes will not have to be inspected annually, but instead on a three-year rotation if they are up to snuff.

The first apartment complex to qualify for the three-year inspection is at 3999 Cedar Ave. Owners Paul and Sharon Sterling will also receive a 50 percent reduction in the fees.

To achieve this classification properties must have three consecutive years of MFD certification, defensible space, TRPA's erosion control (aka BMP) certificate and a few other items.

"We think it's a great program," Sharon Sterling said. The Sterlings hope the ordinance changes will inspire other landlords to make necessary improvements, especially considering the number of children who reside in South Lake Tahoe apartments.



Tahoe Village Apartments on Cedar Avenue are the first to be on the three-year inspection cycle.

Photo/LTN

The Sterlings bought the complex in 2000.

"I've been on hand for his inspections. He literally goes unit by unit," Sterling said of Potts. "Ours was a 40-year-old old building when we bought it and it didn't have a certain type of exit sign. It was small improvements like that he called out."

It also helps that the Sterlings live at the complex.

"They have actually done many things at their building that go

well beyond the basic requirements of the MFD program, including a couple of years ago full window change out to dual pane, installation of a radon reduction system, secured coded building entry and many other things," Potts said. "They serve as a great example of how to do it right."

Potts anticipates a handful more properties may qualify in the next year for the three-year inspection cycle.

He has a list of 59 items he looks for on the inside of a unit and 55 items on the outside. They range from making sure windows don't have cracks to proper ventilation to plumbing and electrical issues. Exterior items include landscaping, fire alarms, handrails on stairs, and fences.

Potts has been in charge of the program since being hired by the city in September 2005. Part of what makes him qualified is having graduated from the Butte College Building Inspection Technology Program. He also is a certified property maintenance and housing inspector.

Property owners pay \$50 per unit each year. With the new units coming online next month, it will bring the total to 1,335 in 75 complexes that fall into the city's jurisdiction. This equates to \$66,750 in annual fees.

The money is used to cover the cost of the program.

Owners pay for the fee when their annual business license fee is due in July.

Sierra Vista is the largest complex in the city at 94 units.

Potts said six properties from the beginning have never been certified.

"They are not willing to do all the things we are asking, but they all have made progress," he said.

Landlords are supposed to make interior improvements 60 days

after being notified of infractions and have 90 days for exterior issues. However, for the imminent violations, the problem must be rectified between 24 and 72 hours depending on what's wrong.

For now, hotels that operate as long-term housing are exempt from the inspections.

"If hotels are incorporated into the program, they would have to meet a different standard because they are not built to be used as an apartment," Potts said.