



Iowa Landlord Association

*Dedicated to providing harmony
with housing providers and tenants*

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November 25, 2002

Dear Mayor Daniels and Council Members Hensley, Coleman, Vlassis, and Brooks:

As Des Moines citizens, taxpayers, and property owners we wish to express our disappointment in this Council's handling of the increase in rental inspection fees. We are frustrated at your apparent disregard for the well being of the citizens of our city.

In the past two months, a great deal of factual information has been provided to you regarding the revised fees and schedules for the Neighborhood Inspection Division (NID). Some of this information includes:

- Des Moines' new inspection rates are an average of more than three times higher than the current rates of surrounding areas. West Des Moines, Windsor Heights, and Urbandale achieve the same service for a fraction of the price.
- Using the number of units inspected each year provided to you by the NID and a calculator, figures indicate that each inspector will need to inspect an average of only 13.4 units per week under the new system. (See attachment #1.) Since the average building in Des Moines has 13 units, an inspector can fulfill his or her *whole week's quota* in the hour or so required to inspect one average sized building. (See attachment #2.) You have all been made aware of these straightforward figures, yet you have chosen to ignore them.
- On November 18, you voted in a policy that will reduce the workload of the inspectors by 25-30% - yet no mention has been made of reducing the NID's budget. Furthermore, the proposed new code will allow landlords to "buy" an additional 50% increase in time between inspections for multi family dwellings, and a 33% increase in time for single family homes and duplexes. (See copy of page 9 of the draft, section 6b, attachment #3.) This will reduce their workload even further. Still, there is no mention of reducing the budget.
- You have allowed a small section of the new rental code to be taken out of context, and passed on its own. The fee structure is part of a large re-write of the code that includes many new and different provisions that are inextricably connected. They needed to be taken and considered as a whole and not just as bits and pieces.
- You have repeatedly been provided with inaccurate information from City officials. (Ben Bishop has stated the fee increase was approximately 3% per year for the last 11 years, but, a calculator will prove otherwise; you were provided with a "blue letter" indicating Iowa City and Newton charged more than Des Moines but after prompting by concerned landlords, those false figures were corrected; Monday night, Jim Grant repeatedly insisted that landlords would not be required to have their furnaces inspected by a certified mechanic under the new Code when, in fact, as Councilman Cownie demonstrated, that is exactly what is proposed.) After being misled by erroneous statements such as these, you ignored challenges by taxpayers and passed the NID's proposal without scrutiny and verification.
- You have now passed a provision charging landlords for first re-inspections based on promises by the City to provide an unambiguous new Code and an easy to follow "checklist" to go with it. Supposedly this would make it possible for uniform inspections, with no room for individual interpretation. Then, during the third reading, the City acknowledged its new Code would not be finished by the time the new fees come into place, and in fact, would probably not be even be ready by March 15. Yet you still passed

the provision, providing a huge penalty to landlords for first re-inspections, when there is no way for even the best of landlords to predict how the next inspector will interpret the Code.

On November 4, Eric Anderson told you that the Council had to choose, as a philosophy, whether you wish to raise fees for services, or raise property taxes. Clearly, there is another reasonable solution: look for cost cutting measures within the City budget. It is what every home and every business in Des Moines must do on a regular basis. Looking beyond waste in the NID, comparable problems could certainly exist in other departments. By looking at health insurance costs, staffing, and other expenditures you could devise strategies to eliminate your entire budget deficit and then some. There is no need to further burden Des Moines taxpayers.

The NID is either overstaffed or doing other jobs that do not relate to rental inspections. You, as Council members, are empowered to require all departments to justify their figures. They keep time sheets. They have records. It would not be hard to determine whether 18 full time inspectors really each spend 24 hours per week (60% of their time) doing rental inspections. This is what your constituents elected you to do.

We originally opposed these exorbitant fees because of their expense to landlords and tenants. However, our concern is no longer solely about the money. It's about your unwillingness to look at problems within the City.

Please provide a written response to this letter by Friday, December 5, 2002. Please provide details on how and when you will deal with each of the problems outlined in the bullet points in this letter. Until each of these matters has been fully investigated and fairly resolved, we are requesting that you place a moratorium on the increase in rental fees.

An extreme disservice was done to landlords and renters in this city during your last Council meeting. If you continue to refuse to challenge the City's budget, it will continue to spiral out of control. We hope you will reconsider your position on this issue and, in the future, require individual departments to prove their financial needs before you further burden your constituents.

Sincerely,

Dave Sollenbarger, Director
Iowa Landlord Association

Dennis McDonald, Director
Iowa Landlord Association

(In the interests of presenting this letter in a timely manner, it was impractical to obtain individual signatures on this letter. However, the following people have asked to have their name attached as signatories.)

cc: Councilmen Cownie and McPherson