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Portland's fire-safety task force sees education, training as priorities

Meanwhile, a group of landlords will hold a second forum Thursday to discuss fire safety in their buildings after last month's fatal blaze on Noyes Street.

By Randy Billings | December 3, 2014

A task force on Wednesday began laying out a framework and timeline for reviewing Portland's inspection codes and policies in the wake of a fatal fire last month on Noyes Street.

Top priorities to emerge at the initial meeting of seven of the 11 task force members were educating landlords and tenants about fire safety, training city staff about what violations to look for and determining whether the city should have a more rigorous inspection program.

A group of landlords will hold a second forum Thursday to discuss fire safety in their buildings.

Interim City Manager Sheila Hill-Christian told the task force that she hopes the group can have a set of recommendations ready for the City Council before it begins budget deliberations this spring.

"This is important work we're doing," Hill-Christian said. "Sometimes a tragic event brings needed attention and focus to things."

The task force was formed in the wake of a fire at 20-24 Noyes St. that killed six young adults, making it the deadliest fire in Maine in 40 years. The cause of the fire is still under investigation, according to state Fire Marshal Joseph Thomas.

At its first meeting, the task force, which includes Boston Deputy Fire Chief Joseph Fleming, struggled to focus on the goals and purpose of the review.

"Really some of the stuff you are concerned with has to be dealt with at the state level," Fleming said. "This wasn't a Portland tragedy. It was a Maine tragedy. It's really a Maine issue."

But Hill-Christian urged the group to focus on properties like Noyes Street, an old duplex, and try to find ways the city can prevent similar tragedies in the future.

"I want to start with what got us here and talk about that example first," she said.

The city has two inspection divisions – one for building codes and another for fire codes. Often, those codes overlap or conflict with one another, task force members said.

Older homes, which make up the majority of Portland's housing stock, are exempt from some new code requirements. Others are in historic preservation zones, which limits the types of renovations that can be done.

The city's building codes inspections division has three inspectors, one of whom is charged with investigating complaints about trash, disorderly houses, illegal units, hoarders and outside dining. The inspection program has been complaint-based for the past 10 years, according to the city.

The fire department has a separate inspection program for commercial buildings and apartment buildings with three or more units. Firefighters inspect roughly 4,900 of these properties, while a fire captain and lieutenant are charged with following up with code violators.

Duplexes such as 20-24 Noyes St. are considered private homes and are inspected only if they are fully rented and the subject of a complaint.

After the fire, it was revealed that neighbors had complained about the condition of the duplex owned by Gregory Nisbet, a local real estate agent. Although those complaints had prompted 16 city inspections since 2003, the city has not elaborated on those inspections, citing the ongoing investigation of the fire.

As the city embarks on a review of its inspections codes and policies, landlords continue to meet independently to discuss fire safety.

Sullivan Multi-Family Realty will be holding a fire-safety forum at 5:30 p.m. Thursday at The Woodfords Club.

Owner Bill Sullivan said his company has brokered sales of many multiunit apartment buildings in Portland, so it made sense to try to help landlords understand what they need to do to protect themselves and their tenants.

Thursday's forum, which is open to the public, is the second since the Noyes Street fire. The Southern Maine Landlord Association held a forum Nov. 19 at King Middle School that included representatives of the Portland Fire Department.

"I think people still feel confused by the code and it's a challenge to figure out if you're in compliance," said Brit Vitalius, landlord association president. "Hopefully that's one of the results of the task force, is just clarification and simplification, especially for these small landlords."

Sullivan said he has received "a lot of calls" from landlords who are trying to understand the differences between federal, state and municipal fire codes. Some landlords own apartment buildings in multiple towns and wonder if there is any consistency between codes, he said.

Sullivan said specific questions will be taken from landlords at Thursday's forum, following a 30-minute presentation by attorney Peter J. Van Hemel.

"We're going to find out these questions for them and hopefully give them answers about what they need to do," he said.

The American Red Cross will be at The Woodfords Club handing out battery-operated smoke detectors, Sullivan said.