

County Examines Fire Codes

By Heather Tyson
Collegian Staff Writer

The Centre Region Code Administration, an agency of the county, recently proposed a new six-point plan to reduce fire-related injuries and fatalities in all new and existing off-campus properties, including installing sprinkler systems in all rental properties.

The code administration is looking at both apartment buildings and single-family homes where fire safety improvements can be made, said Tim Knisely, senior fire and housing inspector of Centre Region Code Administration.

Knisely said the standards they proposed to the council would include an increase in house and apartment permit fees from \$16 to \$25, Knisely said.

Landlords are responsible for some fire-safety requirements in each property such as installing fire alarms and provide a working smoke detector, Knisely said. However, it is the tenant's responsibility to ensure that all smoke detectors in their residence are functioning properly.

Before her tenants move in, Ginny Chuba, a property owner and manager of a number of Pennsylvania student and family properties, requires tenants to sign a form stating that smoke detectors and fire extinguishers are in working order.

"The most common problem is that people forget to connect the power source again or reinstall the battery," Knisley said.

Penn State student Christopher Raspanti died April 27 in a house fire at 500 E. Beaver Ave. The house had no working smoke detectors.

In addition to sprinklers, the administration wants to install interconnected smoke detectors that would alert people in all bedrooms of an apartment unit in case of a fire. Apartment units in each building would not be interconnected.

"In an apartment building with more than one apartment, not all of the smoke detectors will go off in the building," Knisely said. "This reduces false alarms from excess cooking heat or steam from a shower."

The proposal also includes increasing off-campus residence inspections to once every two years, instead of the current three to four years between inspections.

Knisely said property owners' total expenses would depend on a dwelling or apartment building's size, which would determine the number of sprinklers and smoke detectors installed.

"Roughly, sprinklers cost \$2 to \$4 per sq. ft. and smoke detectors can cost from \$50 to \$75 each," Knisely said.

Ed Comeau, director of the Center For Campus Fire Safety, a Massachusetts-based non-profit organization that works alongside the CRCA, said 75 percent of fatal fires nationally since January 2000 have occurred in off-campus housing.

"We need to emphasize to college-aged students that it can and might happen to them, and we only want them to be prepared," Comeau said.

Feras Alshehri (sophomore-electrical engineering), who lives at The Pointe, 501 Vairo Blvd., said although he knows how to test the smoke detectors in his apartment, he has not.

"Sometimes it goes off after I've finished cooking," Alshehri said.

To improve fire safety standards for off-campus properties, members of the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) voted in June to require all new one- and two- family residences be equipped with automatic fire sprinklers.

Gary Keith, NFPA vice president of building codes and life safety, said the sprinkler requirement falls under the NFPA Life Safety Code, which is currently used in 39 states, not including Pennsylvania.

The council work center is slated to discuss the proposal again on July 11.