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NEWS

Rate hikes, cuts lay on the horizon

BY MARK HELFEN
DAILY NEWS CORRESPONDENT

It's going to cost more to flush a toilet in Mountain View.

In addition to a 9 percent hike in sewer fees, water rates are slated to go up 5 percent and it's going to cost an extra 2 percent for rubbish collection.

The increased fees, including higher city hall fees that the mayor worries may scare developers away, are part of the new city budget that kicks in July 1.

Cuts are also on the horizon, including an apartment inspection program that will leave one inspector to oversee a city where 57 percent of the multi-family complexes have at least one serious violation.

Higher fines for violations could help bring the number down, officials said.

City Council took straw votes on the cuts Tuesday night with final approval slated for next week.

Mountain View's multi-family inspection program checks each apartment in complex where a serious violation was recorded every three years.

Complexes with no serious violations are inspected every 8 years.

"Serious violations" are habitability issues," Mountain View Fire Marshal Gary Leinweber said. Missing batteries in smoke detectors, fire alarms not functioning, or permanently locked windows are examples of serious violations according to Leinweber.

"Fifty-seven percent of complexes have at least one unit with a serious violation," Leinweber said. The number has remained consistent for the last several years.

In the straw vote approved by the council, the number of building inspectors in the program will be reduced from two to one. The frequency of inspections for complexes with serious violations will be reduced from every three years to every four years. And complexes without serious violations will only be inspected on a "referral basis," meaning only when a complaint is registered.

Despite the decrease in inspections, council members suggested the number of apartments with serious violations would decrease over the next year.

Administrative fines up to "\$500 per day per unit per violation," can now be applied, according to Leinweber. In addition, common areas in apartment complexes will still be inspected annually as required by state law, but the fire inspectors will be trained to inspect vacant units. If they see violations, they will refer the complex to the building inspector. The annual inspection fees for complexes with serious violations will be higher, although the exact figures haven't been finalized.

"We will now have very effective tools that we didn't have in the past. The new administrative fines will have a powerful impact," said council member Rosemary Stasek told the Daily News yesterday. "I expect the numbers to go down dramatically."

Mayor Matt Pear said the violations required a closer look. "It may be that a small number of owners" cause most of the violations.

"A team focus of Project Sentinel, and the Tri-County Apartment Association could put pressure on building owners," said Pear.

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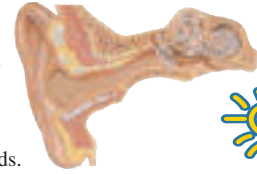
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