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Today's news in 20 minutes.

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City seeks Concord's help

Aldermen lobby legislators to battle lousy landlords

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On Tuesday, the Board of Mayor and Aldermen voted to lobby the state for legislation changes that would improve the city's ability to enforce housing codes.

The move was recommended by city staff from the building and health departments, who offered three ways that state legislation could be changed to help the city crack down on negligent landlords.

City officials also raised the fines for code violations, a move that doesn't need approval from the state.

One recommended change would allow the city to charge ordinance violations involving life safety issues, such as fire codes, as misdemeanors rather than violations.

The staff feels that the in-

creased pressure from penalties attached to misdemeanors would help encourage landlords to comply. Misdemeanors carry charges such as community service and, in rare cases, jail time. Violations only carry fines.

Presently, violations are the only offense that a city can create by ordinance.

Another suggestion is to add

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a new provision into state law that would allow the city to fix building violations at the owner's expense. This would only occur after a court had found the owner guilty of violating a housing code ordinance.

Under the recommendation,

if the owner fails to reimburse the city for the work, officials would be able to take control of the building, just as what happens if an owner fails to pay property taxes.

Finally, the city will ask the state to consider implementing a new process for handling ordinance violations in court. As it currently stands, crowded court dockets makes it a lengthy and difficult process to take a landlord to court. Ordinance cases are rarely considered a top-priority in the court system.

Officials suggested establishing an administrative agency in the system specifically to handle cases involving ordinance violations. Members of the agency would have specialized knowledge handling these cases, greatly speeding up the

process.

The staff's recommendations came after they reviewed similar suggestions from a committee associated with NeighborWorks Greater Manchester, a non-profit housing organization.

The board voted unanimously to push the recommendations at the state level.

With a 13-1 vote, aldermen also raised fines for violations from \$100 to \$200 for a first offense, from \$200 to \$300 for a second offense and from \$300 to \$500 for a third offense.

"This is one tool out of a full tool box that we need to address this problem," Ward 1 Alderman Mark Roy said of the increases. "We have code violations throughout this city."

The increased fines still need to go before the Committee on Bills on Second Reading for technical review, after which, a second vote from the full board of aldermen will be taken.



Mark Roy