

POTTSTOWN CITIZENS FOR
Responsible
 GOVERNMENT

Systematic rental inspections needed

Last month, Pottstown Council passed a new ordinance with more rules for landlords. The law is supposed to ensure landlords pay their taxes and water and sewer and trash bills on time. Landlords will be required to monitor their tenants for misbehavior.

Unfortunately, the ordinance has a fatal flaw. It relies on landlords to voluntarily register their rental units, and to notify the borough every time an apartment turns over so it can be inspected.

This is not only inefficient, it misses the properties most in need of inspections — the ones owned by scofflaws.

Yesterday, I suggested the borough should inventory every property in Pottstown to identify all rental units.

That inventory should be posted on the borough's website.

In addition, rather than inspect rental units every time there is a change in occupancy, the borough should systematically inspect every rental unit in Pottstown on a rotating basis.

The borough's new ordinance, just like a similar ordinance passed in 2002, requires that each unit should be inspected at least once every five years.

The 2002 ordinance called for the borough code enforcement office to establish and phase in a systematic inspection program. But that hasn't happened yet.

Meanwhile, landlords are supposed to notify the borough every time there is a vacancy so the borough can inspect the rental unit before a new occupant moves in.

As a result, conscientious landlords are constantly having their properties inspected, perhaps as much as every year, while landlords who haven't registered their properties avoid inspections

altogether.

The systematic inspection program ensures each property is reviewed.

Rather than waste time inspecting the same properties over and over, the borough should invest the effort to identify every rental property in the borough.

Then it should set up a schedule to have each property inspected on a street by street, block by block process.

For example, every property on the 100 block of High Street might be inspected on week 1, and the 200 block inspected on week 2.

This would make much more efficient use of the inspectors' time, and the landlord's as well. If a landlord has five rental units in one building, for example, they can all be inspected at the same time, rather than piecemeal.

The schedule can be posted well ahead of time on the borough's website for everyone's convenience, and landlords could be fined for failure to show up at the appointed time.

The frequency of inspections can be determined by the number of code enforcement officers. In recent years, the number of officers has been reduced, so a five-year cycle might be best.

In addition to inspecting each rental unit, the borough might also institute annual inspections of common areas of all rental properties. That way, the worst problems can be caught in the bud.

Pottstown should also work toward posting all inspection results on the borough website. Nothing would do more to instill confidence in local government than seeing the results of efficient code enforcement.

Thomas Hylton, a 38-year resident of Pottstown, is website editor of Pottstown Citizens for Responsible Government.



Commentary by
 Thomas Hylton

Summary

- **Council recently passed a new law designed to get tough on neglectful landlords.**
- **The ordinance won't work unless the borough creates an inventory of rental properties and ensures each one is inspected in a systematic fashion.**