



## **Response to City Council Agenda Bill #20285**

**Proposed Motion:** Approve the AS Response to City Council Agenda Bill #20285

**Sponsor:** Kaylee Galloway, ASVP for Governmental Affairs

**Persons of Contact:** AS Legal Information Center Coordinator, AS Local Liaison

**Date:** Feb 25<sup>th</sup>, 2014

**Attachments:** Response to City Council Agenda Bill #20285

### **Background and Concepts:**

The AS Board passed the Rental Safety Proposal on December 11<sup>th</sup>, 2013, and the purpose of that document is to guide the AS Local Liaison while he lobbies for student rental safety issues at a local level. Recently, on the 27<sup>th</sup> of January, Mayor Linville released her rental registration proposal to city council (labeled City Council Agenda Bill #20285). The attached document is proposed as the Associated Students' response to Bill #20285. The purpose of this response is to thoughtfully point out ways in which Mayor Linville's proposal can be improved so that it may reflect students' concerns.

### **Summary of Response:**

The response is divided into two sections: the issues and our proposed solutions. We have identified 6 major concerns in the current proposal and have suggested multiple alterations that would make the proposed legislation more effective in addressing the concerns of student renters.

The attached document was written by Joseph Levy, the AS Local Liaison, and Samantha Goldblatt, the AS Legal Information Center Coordinator.

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### **Regarding Rental Registration**

When the Associated Students of Western Washington University first learned of City Council Agenda Bill #20285, the briefing on the initiation of a rental registration program, we were very pleased. Rental safety is a long-standing issue that has affected many generations of Western students, and as an organization we support new city ordinances establishing programs that include rental registration, inspection, education, and increased communication between all members of the community about this issue.

While we think that rental registration is an excellent first step in better ensuring the health and safety of rental occupants, there are some points that we find problematic about City Council Agenda Bill #20285. These points are summarized below:

1. According to point #1 of the program framework, full implementation is expected to take 3 to 5 years. This seems to be a long period of time given the nature of this program.
2. According to point #9 of the program framework, the only positive incentive for landlords seems to be the ability to be on the publicized list of registered rentals. There should be additional benefits for landlord registration.
3. According to points #5-8 of the program framework, the ramifications for being a non-compliant landlords are removal from the published registered rentals list after receiving three independent building code violations. These repercussions will not sufficiently prevent violations.
4. According to point #10 of the program framework, the proposed rate of inspection is 0.5%. This is too low to be effective.
5. According to point #4 of the program framework, the city is planning on developing a public outreach and education program based on state law for landlords and tenants in Bellingham. While the Associated Students supports this concept, the current language is too vague.
6. According to point #10 of the program framework, the proposed random inspections of registered rentals are set to take place in January. This timing is inconvenient because it occurs in the middle of a rental year for many tenants.

For these issues, the Associated Students of Western Washington University requests the following regarding City Council Agenda Bill #20285:

1. We request a timeline on the specifics of the implementation. It would be beneficial to understand why this is such a long process; if there is no benefit to the length, we would prefer to have the full implementation period shortened.
2. If landlords are going to want to register their rentals, there needs to be positive incentives for being *on* the registration. It seems that the only positive motivation for them is the opportunity to be on this published list, which doesn't seem to be a powerful enough incentive for major rental companies that already publicize their housing. Additionally, there is an excess of demand for rental housing in Bellingham, so it is very likely that those properties not registered would still be easily rented.<sup>1</sup>
3. It is unrealistic to assume that a mere code violation will be sufficient in persuading landlords to register their properties. One must consider the fact that many individuals already know who the infamously non-compliant landlords are, and yet still rent from said landlords. Other negative repercussions should be explored, such as a fine that could be used to greater fund other parts of the program.
4. With inspections at 0.5%, it would take 200 years for every registered rental in Bellingham to be inspected under this program. This does not create a reasonable expectation for landlords to believe that they are at risk of having an inspection. We would like the possibility of a higher inspection rate to be explored. Furthermore, we recommend a greater rate of inspections in those neighborhoods that have more rental housing, such as Sehome, York, and Happy Valley.<sup>2</sup>
5. It would be preferable to have the city's plans for "a public outreach and education program" elaborated, and to include the Associated Students and Western Washington University in those discussions so that we can help define and develop such a program. We hope that WWU will be only one part of the education program, because it is imperative that a substantial amount of education and outreach be directed towards non-students as well, particularly towards those who have a greater risk of living in unsafe housing.
6. Being that a large portion of renters in Bellingham are students, it does not make sense to have inspections occur in January, which is the middle of a rental agreement for most students. If possible, we would like to see the inspections occur in the summer (July) when many leases are ending.

To conclude, we hope that in your discussions about City Council Agenda Bill #20285 you will keep these points in mind. The Associated Students of Western Washington University looks forward to partnering with you all to improve living conditions for the citizens of Bellingham.

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<sup>1</sup> "Bellingham Census", 2010,

<http://www.cob.org/documents/planning/Census2010/Bellingham2010DemographicProfile2pages.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> "Houses Renter Occupied", last modified 2011, <http://www.city-data.com/city/Bellingham-Washington.html>