

City cracking down on SRO sprinkler scofflaws

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required to have filed for a building permit with DBI to install fire sprinklers in all areas of the hotel except commercial spaces, and by Dec. 31, 2002, were supposed to have the work completed.

According to DBI records, by Feb. 14, a year and a half after the first ordinance passed, 29 hotels had on record that they had installed a sprinkler system; about half had been issued their building permits.

The second ordinance extended the deadline for compliance by six months, narrowed the requirement to hotels with 20 or more guest rooms and waived all commercial spaces. It let about 150 building owners off the hook, said Fire Capt. Tom Harvey.

Knowing a new ordinance was coming made it impractical to comply with the first, said Sam Patel, president of the Independent Hotel Owners and Operators Association. He owns several hotels, and in one, the Dahlia Hotel at 74 Turk, he installed sprinklers throughout, including the commercial space, he said, which cost him \$20,000 more than if he had waited for the second ordinance's final version.

"By the time the second ordinance was signed they [property owners] could've, at least, had plans drawn up and ready to go," said Capt. Harvey. Had hotel owners started to comply with the first ordinance by submitting plans, which many did, he said, the Fire Department would have had it on record and given them wiggle room to comply with the second.

One month after hotels were to have complete systems installed, DBI initiated its first clampdown, calling 14 recalcitrant hotel owners or their representatives to a director's hearing to mete out various punishments meant to induce compliance. And a week later, the day the SRO tenants and advocates showed up, DBI hauled in a sec-

ond batch of errant hotel owners.

The time of reckoning was now upon the Shree Ganeshai hotel, the 16th to be called to a DCI hearing.

The SRO tenant who had been recounting her days and nights of constant worry continued her testimony. Brody said she is breathing easier now because her hotel, the Seneca, unlike the Shree Ganeshai, had complied with the ordinance: "I am very grateful for those sprinklers that have been installed in my closet and over my bed; they will probably save my room from becoming destroyed."

DBI hearing officer Marvin Ruiz looked up with raised eyebrows and nodded.

THE SRO ADVOCATES

Various groups have sprung up to help preserve SRO hotels and empower the tenants, including the city's Single Room Occupancy Hotel Safety and Stabilization task force, composed of tenants, hotel owners, service providers and city staff. The SRO task force was instrumental in establishing the ordinance guidelines.

Community organizations also deal with issues related to SROs, including the Tenant Associations Coalition, which holds monthly meetings and workshops to train tenant leaders. Members include representatives from 50 buildings and at least 15 housing and safety organizations, said TAC program director Michael Nulty, who is also on the *Central City Extra's* editorial advisory committee. Rather than duplicate efforts, TAC members took code enforcement workshops that were conducted by the SRO Collaborative, Nulty said.

The Tenderloin Housing Clinic founded the Central City SRO Collaborative, which partners with the San Francisco Mental Health Association and Conard House. THC and the Collaborative have also been at the forefront of SRO safety issues and train tenants to advocate for themselves.

Mark Ellinger, a THC-trained tenant advocate, was at the Feb. 6 DBI director's hearing. He lives at the Shree Ganeshai. He became active as a tenant when his hotel's hot water ran cold for two weeks, the heat wasn't turned on for the required hours, and the roof leaked even after numerous complaints.

ROSEMARY BOSQUE

Ellinger and Dodge credit the tenacity of DBI Chief Housing Inspector Rosemary Bosque for the sprinkler ordinance crackdown. "This is no small task; we're doing this while we're doing all our tenant complaints, all our residential hotel inspections, apartment inspections, and so it's all integrated," Bosque said.

There is little excuse for an owner to not at least have started the process of complying with the ordinance,

Bosque said. All were mailed detailed information with a form attached that was to initiate the compliance process: their plans for a building permit. DBI also made several presentations to the city's SRO task force. "I think we've been very good about providing them whatever information necessary to go out there and get the work done," Bosque said.

There are 20 inspectors in Bosque's division; 19 go out in the field. While conducting routine inspections, they check on the hotels that haven't filed building permits for sprinklers — 174 as of Feb. 14. They started with the big hotels and are now concentrating on the smaller ones, such as the 32-room Shree Ganeshai.

As of Feb. 14, DBI had posted 102 notices of violation on noncompliant hotels, and scheduled 29 director's hearings with building owners or their representatives. Hotels that have filed for a building permit but are still out of compliance with the ordinance won't get a notice of violation, said Bosque. If they don't move along in the process, though, they eventually will be scheduled for director's hearings.

Once the inspectors slap a notice of violation on a hotel, as they did with the Shree Ganeshai on Dec. 16 for the substandard roof and its lack of fire sprinklers, the property owner has a certain number of days to correct the violation. In the case of the Shree Ganeshai, Dipakbhai Patel had 15 days to comply. He didn't make it. He then received a notice to address a DBI hearing on Feb. 6, where Patel potentially could receive some form of redress — what DBI calls "tools" to compel property owner

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HOW MUCH IT COSTS

DAVID PATEL, son of the owner of the Shree Ganeshai, listed some expenses he faces installing additional fire sprinklers; the hotel now has sprinklers only in its hallways. First, he said, the hotel needs sufficient pressure in its main water intake from the street, which means dealing with the Water Department. If the pipes that go into the building need to be enlarged, it could cost up to \$5,000 to install a new meter.

Patel said he hired consultant Henry Karnilowicz to manage the project for a very reasonable \$500, but from there costs soar: The design plan by a sprinkler installation company is \$1,500 to \$2,500, and with each sprinkler head costing up to \$200 and at least 90 heads required for the hotel, he said he's looking at \$1,000-\$1,500 per room. He estimates that the total cost for the Shree Ganeshai will be \$25,000 to \$30,000. He said he may have to pass on the cost to his tenants.

Sam Patel, president of the Independent Hotel Owners and Operators Association, on the other hand, is paying more for his sprinkler systems. His average cost of a sprinkler head when all project costs are factored in, is about \$350; to sprinkle a 50-room hotel costs about \$70,000, he said.

Most hotel operators he has talked to are not planning to pass on the cost to tenants, Patel said. "At this time, we're not planning on raising rents. We know our tenants can only pay so much," he said.

Everyone, including property owners, many of whom live in the SRO hotels they own, want to have sprinklers, claimed Patel. It's just the time allowed for compliance was too short, he said. "We're all for it," he said, "sprinklers are good for everyone."

— Karen Oberdorfer

"Those sprinklers will probably save my room."

Delphine Brody
SENECA TENANT

PHOTO BY CARL ANGEL



The Seneca is among the first SROs to put in sprinklers.