

Fire system removal OK'd

Landlord wins appeal; sprinklers not required

By M.J. Mahon

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BLOOMSBURG -- A town landlord may remove a fire sprinkler system in a former fraternity house instead of paying thousands to keep it working, a town board decided Monday.

The town code enforcement office sent Branden Long, owner of BGL Housing LLC, a notice of violation in November for not having the sprinkler system at his 115 E. First St. rental property inspected for more than a year. That is an annual requirement needed to keep his rental license.

Long appealed the violation and, on Monday, told the Code Appeal Board his building should not be required to even have sprinklers because it is a single family home, not an apartment building.

He is currently renting the six-bedroom house to four men in their 30s, he said.

He successfully argued his 115 E. Third St. rental property is not required to have a sprinkler system because it is not a multi-unit building.

The board ultimately agreed, but not before remembering two fatal fires decades ago that led to the town adopting strict fire safety laws.

System won't pass inspection

Long told the town's Code Appeal Board the system needed a costly repair he would rather not pay -- and asked the board for permission to remove it entirely.

A single valve on the air intake compressor is broken and will cost \$6,000 to replace, he said. When he bought the building, he spent more than \$4,000 to repair the system only to have it break again, he said.

Regulations the town follows say single family homes do not require that level of fire protection.

However, the 2018 International Building Maintenance Codes adopted by the town in 2024 do not define a single family home. They do, however, define communal living spaces, like dorms, as being buildings with multiple bedrooms and shared common areas.

Kyle Bauman, a town code enforcement officer, argued the house is no different than fraternity and sorority houses on East Street and Lightstreet Road, where groups of students live together. Those houses are required to have interconnected fire alarms, and if built new today, would be required to have sprinklers.

Long's building has interconnected fire alarms, which he has not asked to remove.

Bauman said property maintenance regulations clearly state once a fire suppression system is installed, it cannot be removed from any building, even if it isn't required.



"Even if a fire protection system was not required by code, if it is installed, it has to be maintained per the code requirements," Bauman said.

Former group home

Long bought the house in 2024 from Community Strategies Group, which had once rented it to people with disabilities. Because of its former use as a group home, a fire sprinkler system was required, he said.

When he bought the house, college students were living there -- and it was once a fraternity house. He maintains a student rental license because he may decide to rent to college students in the future, he said.

The house has six bedrooms; it has not been sectioned off into apartments. The kitchen, living room and bathrooms are shared, Long said.

Board solicitor Rob Davidson said state and federal building regulations -- and the international fire code -- do not define a single family home. Davidson said when such definitions are not clear, the codes assume a "common meaning."

In this case, Bauman said because Long rents the house to several unrelated people, it most closely meets the definition of communal living similar to a dormitory.

While a traditional single family home does not require sprinklers or interconnected smoke alarms, rental properties do, Bauman said.

Single family, defined

The appeal board -- made up of Ed Sabo Jr., Sylvia Cost, Doug Reiter and Elizabeth Witting -- focused most on how to classify the former fraternity house.

Witting said the board needed to determine how to even define "single family." "Is it a type of building or the type of resident?" she asked.

A single family is defined by the town's zoning ordinance as people living together who are related, but Davidson noted zoning and codes operate under differing rules.

Davidson said zoning laws, which do define a single family house, do not apply to building codes, which do not.

"What you need to determine is: is Long required to maintain the system? And if not, can he remove it?" Davidson said.

Sabo said despite who occupies it, the building itself should be considered a single family home.

Bauman said by the town's zoning ordinance, 115 E. Third St. should be considered a one-unit dwelling -- but its use as a rental muddies the waters by classifying it as communal living.

Adding to the confusion are the building maintenance regulations and international fire codes that clearly state existing fire suppression systems cannot be removed from residential buildings.

Rentals in town -- for students and permanent residents -- are required to have interconnected smoke alarms, and if newly built, need sprinkler systems.

"It is complicated," Costa said.

For Sabo, the issue was not complicated at all. The house is not split up into apartments, and the safety of people living there has nothing to do with being related to one another.

Sabo said Long should be able to get rid of a system that isn't required -- and is costing him thousands to maintain.

Long agreed.

"If it is required, it has to be maintained and kept up with," Long said. "But it is not required."

Board sets house rules

Before the board went behind closed doors to make a decision, Davidson urged members to be cautious about relaxing fire safety rules.

"The law is not clear on this. There are multiple types of ordinances and multiple definitions," Davidson said. "My personal opinion as a 30-plus year volunteer firefighter ... I love sprinkler systems. In today's world it is a difference between a house standing and bringing in an excavator and tearing it down."

"But, my legal opinion is, I don't know. There is no clear legal answer," he said.

The board ultimately decided buildings with sprinklers have to keep them installed and maintained -- as long as they are required by town law.

In this case, Long is permitted to remove the sprinkler systems, because the board decided the rental property remains a single family home.

"If a sprinkler system remains in the building, it must be maintained as per code," Sabo said in his motion to approve Long's appeal. "But, we are determining it is a single family dwelling. It is not required and it can be removed."

But, the board said, that does not mean laws requiring interconnected smoke alarms or other safety features in town will be relaxed.

Remembrance

Costa, who voted with the rest of the board to allow Long to remove the sprinklers, remembered two fires, in 1994 and 2000, that combined to claim the lives of eight college students.

"Are you aware of the other fires that Bloomsburg has had over the years where students have died?" Costa asked.

In 1995, five students died after a couch caught fire on the porch of the North Iron Street Beta Sigma Delta fraternity house. In 2000, three more died in an electrical fire at the Tau Kappa Epsilon fraternity house on East Fourth Street.

"That is why we got the interconnected alarms," board member Doug Reiter said.

"The reason the codes continue to get stricter about the sprinklers ... is because there have been fires," Wittig said. "Including fatalities in Bloomsburg, in similar housing that was off campus."

Long, who owns five other properties in town, said he knew of the past town tragedies. As a student at the former Bloomsburg University, he spent a semester as an intern in the town code enforcement office in 2021, he said.

"I was a student at Bloomsburg and have been actively investing in Bloomsburg for the past four years," Long said. "I am young and plan to continue to invest here in our town. And, if this was something I truly thought was necessary, I would fix it."

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