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City issues more than 3,500 fines to landlords during move-in frenzy

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DINA RUDICK/GLOBE STAFF

Trash littered Linden Street in Allston this past week.

By Matt Rocheleau

GLOBE STAFF SEPTEMBER 04, 2015

The city of Boston issued more than 3,500 fines to landlords for flouting property codes — mainly for

excessive trash — and 450 violations of housing, building, environmental, and sanitary codes, during the height of the annual move-in frenzy surrounding Sept. 1.

Most of the problems were found in the city's most student-dense neighborhoods, Allston, Brighton, Fenway, and Mission Hill.

City officials said that so far workers have not encountered a single case of an off-campus apartment where more than four full-time undergraduates were living together, which is illegal under municipal zoning rules.

Some have criticized the city for not doing more to enforce the rule, particularly in the wake of a Globe Spotlight investigation in the spring of 2014 that detailed a host of overcrowded, unsafe off-campus units in the city's college neighborhoods.

The city last year identified several hundred units that appeared to violate the rule barring more than four undergraduates from living together, but never issued a violation.

William Christopher, commissioner of Boston's Inspectional Services Department, said the rule is "basically unenforceable."

"We tried every possible method ... First of all, people don't have to let us in the building and there's nothing that forces people to identify to us who they are" — which means officials can't determine whether the tenants are undergraduates, he said in an interview Friday.

Christopher said the city council plans to hold public hearings about the rule next month.

"Mayor Walsh has been wrestling with this because we want to solve this problem," he said.

Councilors Josh Zakim and Mark Ciommo this week filed an order that the council hold a hearing to examine the zoning rule.

The hearing "will provide ISD and housing experts with an opportunity to present new ideas on how

The advertisement is for the Institution for Savings, a financial institution established in 1820. It features a green and white color scheme. The main headline reads "Great Rate. Don't Wait." Below this, it states "Loans up to \$2 Million. No Points*!". A prominent green box on the right displays two interest rates: 3.750% (labeled "interest rate") and 3.788% (labeled "APR"). Below these rates, it specifies "30-Year Fixed Rate Residential Mortgage". At the bottom, there is a logo of a building and the text "INSTITUTION FOR SAVINGS BUILDING STRONGER COMMUNITIES TOGETHER SINCE 1820." A small button with the text "*Click here for more information." is located below the headline.

to more effectively enforce this rule, prevent overcrowding, and fulfill the city's mission of ensuring safe and healthy housing," an announcement from Zakim's office said.

"Our inspectors have been working hard on this issue, but we want to make sure they have all the tools needed to effectively address student overcrowding," said a statement from Zakim.

Each year, in the days around Sept. 1, the city deploys dozens of inspectors and code enforcement officers who keep an eye out for problems and talk with new students and residents to help the process run as smoothly as possible.

Of the 3,527 fines the city issued between Aug. 28 and Sept. 2, 1,692 were written to property owners in Allston-Brighton, while 785 were written to landlords in Mission Hill, according to data from the Department of Public Works.

Separately, city workers between Aug. 28 and Sept. 3 wrote 447 violations, which do not fine landlords but require them to remedy problems.

The total included 79 violations for missing or non-functioning smoke or carbon monoxide detectors.

More than 45 violations were issued for rat or bug infestations, another two dozen were handed out for unsafe structures, and about 30 were issued for unsanitary conditions.

Still, Christopher said, housing conditions this year appeared better than this time a year ago.

"We saw the quality of the housing stock was actually better than we saw the year before," he said.

"Were there problematic properties? Absolutely, there were. But it seems the landlords have the properties in a little better condition."

Some have criticized the city, saying officials do not do enough during the rest of the year to monitor and crack down on sometimes seriously subpar housing conditions.

Christopher said the city plans to conduct inspections and to work to educate residents and landlords year-round.

"ISD is there to help," he said. "The priority is and always will be safety."

Matt Rocheleau can be reached at matthew.rocheleau@globe.com. Follow him on Twitter [@mrochele](https://twitter.com/mrochele)

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