

Housing authorities ban indoor smoking

By Jessica Musicar, Staff Writer

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NORTH BEND — Alan Pape doesn't like going into smokers' apartments. But as the maintenance mechanic for the North Bend City/Coos-Curry Housing Authorities, it's part of the job.

“When you have to stand in them for two or three hours at times and breathe in second-hand smoke — I know it's not good for me,” Pape said.

By March, Pape won't have to worry about nicotine-stained walls or smelling like an ash tray at the end of the day.

The two boards of commissioners for the housing authorities adopted a no-indoor-smoking policy for the apartments and buildings they own. The Woodland Apartments Preservation Inc. and Powers Housing Development Inc. — apartments managed by the housing authorities — also passed the same policy. The agencies provide section 8 and low-income housing North Bend, Coos Bay, Myrtle Point, Coquille and Port Orford. Woodland and Powers have units in Empire and Powers. Ned Beman, the executive director of the Housing Authorities, said the policy will likely impact 475 residents. He estimated that about 21 percent smoke.

The policy bans smokers from lighting up inside units or other buildings owned by the agencies. Those who smoke will be allowed to — but outside at least 10 feet from a neighbor's door. It goes into effect on March 1.

Beman said the new policy is the right step for the agencies.

“I think it's a good thing for staff. I think it's a good thing for the agencies and I think it's a good thing for the children in the units because they aren't breathing in second-hand smoke,” Beman said.

Debra Norton, a resident at the North Bend City Housing Authority's Airport Heights apartments, doesn't think the new policy makes sense. She said she and her daughter — who share the apartment with two grandchildren — smoke cigarettes only in their bedrooms.

“I think it sucks because we're not affecting anyone with it,” Norton said on Tuesday. “I think going outside would affect people more who don't smoke than being in our own rooms.”

The idea of smoking outside isn't a pleasant one for Norton, either.

“It gets cold in the winter,” she said.

The housing authority boards have been mulling the possibility for a few years, but began seriously discussing it in September, after receiving a notice from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development that urged housing authorities to adopt such policies.

Beman said the boards unanimously passed the policy because they felt doing so would protect employees' health, reduce costs of preparing vacant units for rent and even the playing field for Section 8 residents who already abide by similar policies. The boards took public comment for 30 days. Those who wrote in convinced the boards to drop a proposed 25-foot smoking distance to 10 feet, but otherwise there were few complaints and some positive comments, the director said.

Cleaning up a smoker's apartment — depending on the extent of the smoke damage — can cost up to an extra \$1,000 in primer coating, paint and man hour, Beman said. And often, those units still don't smell good.

"Because no matter what you do, you can't get the smoke out," he explained.

It makes it hard to rent to someone who is sensitive to smoke, he said.

In most apartments, Pape said he typically has to just touch up the paint job, but in those rented by smokers, he usually can look forward to two days of work.

Beman noted that the cost of the cleanup gets passed back to the renter, which can be hard on someone who is already low income.

"They're hurting themselves by damaging the unit above wear and tear," Beman said.

Brandon Edlund sees the change in policy as a loss of rights. He said he and his wife smoke inside but near their doorway when their children are out.

"There's already enough hoops we have to jump through to live in these apartments," Edlund said, "so I just think it's a bit more of an invasion of privacy to take our smoking away from us."

Beman said the policy won't change until March because Coos County Mental Health representatives asked for time to involve mutual clients in non-smoking programs. It also gives the housing authorities time to have all residents agree and sign the new rules. The agencies are attempting to work with community partners to assist in smoking cessation training.