

Waterloo Region Record

October 9, 2009

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Record staff

New tenants living in multi-unit dwellings owned by Waterloo Region will not be allowed to smoke in their units, regional councillors decided Tuesday. This smoke-free policy will not apply to existing tenants unless they move to a new unit. It takes effect April 1.

The new policy also restricts outdoor smoking to five metres from a building. "I think it is a very fair and balanced approach" to a public health issue, said Coun. Sean Strickland of Waterloo.

But Coun. Jane Mitchell of Waterloo called it an unfair policy that will hurt smokers who are ordered to move by housing authorities because their family size changes.

She said she knows of a single mother who smokes and who has to move to a smaller unit because her children have moved away. "I don't think this is fair or correct. She is not going to stop smoking. She will be homeless now," Mitchell said. "This is these people's homes."

Deb Schlichter, director of regional housing, said the policy allows regional health and housing officials to provide individual support or "other special arrangements" to any tenants experiencing health conditions or other challenges that may restrict their ability to comply with the policy. "She can still smoke. She just can't smoke in her unit," Schlickter said of the woman described by Mitchell.

Regional Chair Ken Seiling said he's heard from many tenants complaining that because they live in subsidized housing, they are subjected to second-hand smoke.

In fact, it was complaints from tenants that prompted regional staff to study this issue. The region received an average of five calls a month from tenants complaining about second-hand smoke seeping into their dwellings from other units or from open windows.

A regional survey of residents living in its 2,723 housing units found that 52 per cent favoured a smoke-free policy and that 57 per cent of respondents said they were exposed to second-hand smoke.

A recent University of Waterloo study found that 30 per cent of households in the general population reported being exposed to second-hand smoke.

About 19 per cent of regional residents smoke, with 16.5 per cent smoking daily. A survey conducted in the region between 2003 and 2006, found that poor, uneducated people were more likely to smoke.

While provincial laws ban smoking in common areas of apartment and condominium buildings, they do not prohibit smoking in private units.

Many landlords, including one in Waterloo, have included no-smoking clauses in new tenancy leases, Schlichter said.

The policy will be enforced on a complaint basis, with eviction being a last resort, she said. It could take seven to 10 years before all units are smoke-free, as the turnover rate for regionally owned housing is about 15 per cent.

Brian King, a University of Buffalo researcher who has extensively studied the effects of second-hand smoke in apartments, told councillors that his study of air quality in apartment units of smokers and non-smokers found that second-hand smoke does transfer between units. "There is no safe level of second-hand smoke," King said.

Jim Bergman, co-director of the Center for Social Gerontology in Michigan, said in 2004, there were no smoke-free apartment buildings in the United States. Today, about 130 American public housing authorities have adopted smoke-free policies, with 31 of them in Michigan.

Bergman said there have been no legal challenges to the policy and enforcement has not been an issue. There are 9,097 community housing units in Waterloo Region, of which 2,723 are owned by the region. The remaining 6,374 are owned by about 50 different groups. Schlichter said the region will be asking these housing providers to consider implementing similar smoking restrictions.

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