

Commercial ventures buy up rentals

By RICHARD WAGONER
Of the Emerald

Commercial ventures are gobbling up Eugene's low-cost housing supply, and unless renters and tenants fight back they may find themselves out in the cold, a neighborhood housing expert believes.

Since October some 40 low-income housing units have been lost to commercial development in Eugene — about 25 units in the West University Neighborhood alone, says Rick Goldstein, a staff member of the Neighborhood Housing Resource Center (NHRC).

NHRC is a coalition of five downtown-area neighborhood groups — West University, Jefferson, Whiteaker, Far West and Westside. The center currently is organizing efforts to preserve Eugene's low-cost housing and promote construction of additional low-income housing units.

Low-cost housing has been lost in areas where commercial uses are allowed because those units provide the least income to

Downtown lures homeowners

owners, Goldstein says.

"People in these neighborhoods are losing their most affordable housing piece by piece," Goldstein says. "We can't afford to lose this kind of housing. The market is not replacing it."

The high cost of replacing low-income housing is seen in the newly completed Abbie Lane housing project, Goldstein says. The project, a joint effort among local, state and federal governments, provided 20 low-income housing units at a cost of \$196,000 to the city.

"Since last fall alone West University has lost that much housing just like that."

But commercial development isn't the only threat to low-cost housing, Goldstein says. Higher gas prices, the new performing arts center and the proposed Emerald Canal are making downtown-area neighborhoods more attractive to higher-income residents.

More affluent people are buy-

ing older rental homes and fixing them up, he says. This not only displaces renters, but it also pushes up property values and could raise existing rents, Goldstein says.

Goldstein says this loss of housing will make Eugene's tight housing market even worse. Available occupancy rates, or the numbers of houses and apartments for rent in Eugene, now stand at about 2 percent to 5 percent, compared to a national average of 5 percent to 8 percent. Some 45 percent of Eugene residents currently rent, compared to a national average of 35 percent. Goldstein says renters make up 95 percent of West University Neighborhood residents.

Goldstein says the city should step in to slow down the loss of low-income housing. Seattle has passed a housing preservation ordinance to limit the loss of low-cost housing. Goldstein would like to see a similar ordinance adopted in Eugene.

But the city will not act unless tenants and renters voice their concerns, he says.

"Unless people in town whom this is important to — tenants and renters — let the city know what they think, the city probably won't take any action. It's easier not to."

Goldstein also is concerned that city-subsidized housing projects being considered for the downtown area will benefit middle- to upper-income residents and slight moderate- to low-income people.

The city is considering financial incentives that would promote construction of new

housing near the Downtown Mall to help prop up its sagging economy. But because middle- and upper-income housing is more profitable for builders, those projects will be promoted at the expense of low-cost housing, Goldstein says.

"So the city is subsidizing (housing) for affluent people," he says.

The Eugene Planning Commission will hold a public hearing in March on the downtown housing proposals. A meeting to discuss the loss of low-income housing in Eugene neighborhoods will be held Feb. 12 at 7:30 p.m. in the West University Neighborhood Center, 1458 Ferry St.

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"If we named a level now, we're stuck with it," Moore says.

Moore told the board that a decision would be "premature" because legislative leaders don't yet know what revenue needs will be until sometime after April 15.

Additionally, the OSU charged that the state board had not assessed the possible consequences that the surcharges would have on tuition income and enrollment.

The board delayed its decision until the Feb. 27 meeting in Portland.

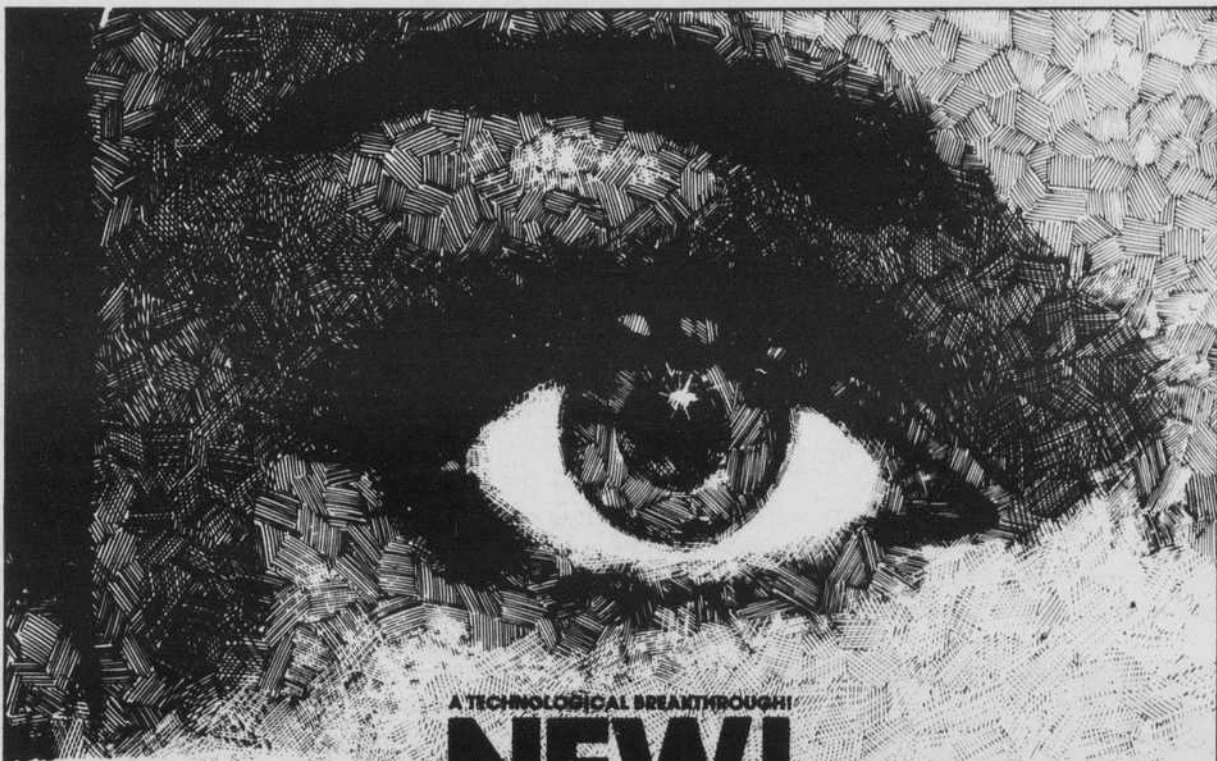
According to Moore's calculations on the

\$123 surcharge, 4,800 of 8,700 students eliminated would be resident undergraduates at one of the state's universities or at Oregon Institute of Technology. About 2,000 University students would be lost, he estimates.

About 1,300 of the 8,700 would return in the second half of the year, Moore says.

With a \$144 surcharge, 9,800 students would be eliminated the first year of the biennium, Moore says — 2,500 of them at the University.

OSU isn't ready to suggest funding alternatives, Moore says. But they plan to propose tuition legislation within the next two weeks.



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