

Renter flees decrepit safety codes

Horton legally refuses to repair

By RICHARD WAGONER
Of the Emerald

Steve Parker is a victim of fright flight.

It's not a well-known affliction, but it victimizes many Eugene-area tenants.

Parker, like many renters, felt threatened because the security at his Alder Street home was so poor. The University student believed his door lock was inadequate, and the door's condition was so poor that it could be kicked down in a matter of seconds.

Eugene police officers who checked Parker's door and home during a security check agreed.

Parker complained to the building's owner, Lane County District Attorney Pat Horton, and found he had no legal ground to force his landlord to upgrade the building.

"I got a hold of the landlord (Horton), and he said if I didn't like it I could pack my bags and go out the door," Parker says.

And that's just what he did.

"I call it fright flight," Parker says. "It's moving from communities because you can't feel safe there."

Parker says he could stand on his back porch and see five buildings that have been burglarized since he moved there. With crime so prevalent and "unsafe" doors and locks, he feared staying put.

Parker is angry at having to move, but he says he doesn't blame Horton for not upgrading

the building. The house meets the city's building code, and it provides the necessary "essential" services required by state law.

"The irony is that it's not Pat Horton's fault. He's just following the letter of the law," Parker says.

The letter of the law that seemingly allows for rental homes and apartments that may be broken into in seconds is state Law 91.770 — the Landlord Tenant Act.

The law requires all landlords to provide a dwelling that is habitable at all times, and that the electricity, heating, plumbing and other "essential" services be maintained in the condition required by applicable codes at the times of installation.

According to the OSPIRG Renter's Handbook available at the University Off-Campus Housing Office, this means a dwelling must have:

- Weather and waterproof exterior, roof, walls, doors and windows.

- Plumbing facilities that comply with applicable law and are maintained in good working order.

- Adequate and approved heating facilities, maintained in good working order.

- A water supply, approved by applicable law, that provides hot and cold running water, has proper fixtures, and is properly connected to a sewage system.

- Electric lighting, wiring

and equipment, approved and maintained in good working order.

- Clean and sanitary buildings and grounds, free from accumulation of debris, filth, rubbish, garbage, rodents and vermin.

- Adequate garbage receptacles.

- Floors, walls, ceilings, stairs and railings maintained in good repair.

- Safety from fire.

- Working locks for all outside doors, and keys to locks that require keys.

Parker's problem developed because the law doesn't define what a door or a "working" lock is.

"Renters and landlords can't come to a conclusion on what a door is," Parker complains. "I paid \$230 a month for a building that has a door that police said wouldn't stand up to 15 seconds of force."

Parker is one of several Eugene residents who are calling for a city ordinance to require deadbolt locks and solid doors on all rental units. It's not a new idea, but it's one that has met with opposition from landlords, businessmen and some city officials.

Eugene city councilor Mark Lindberg strongly supports renters rights. But Lindberg says the city's political climate isn't right yet for an ordinance

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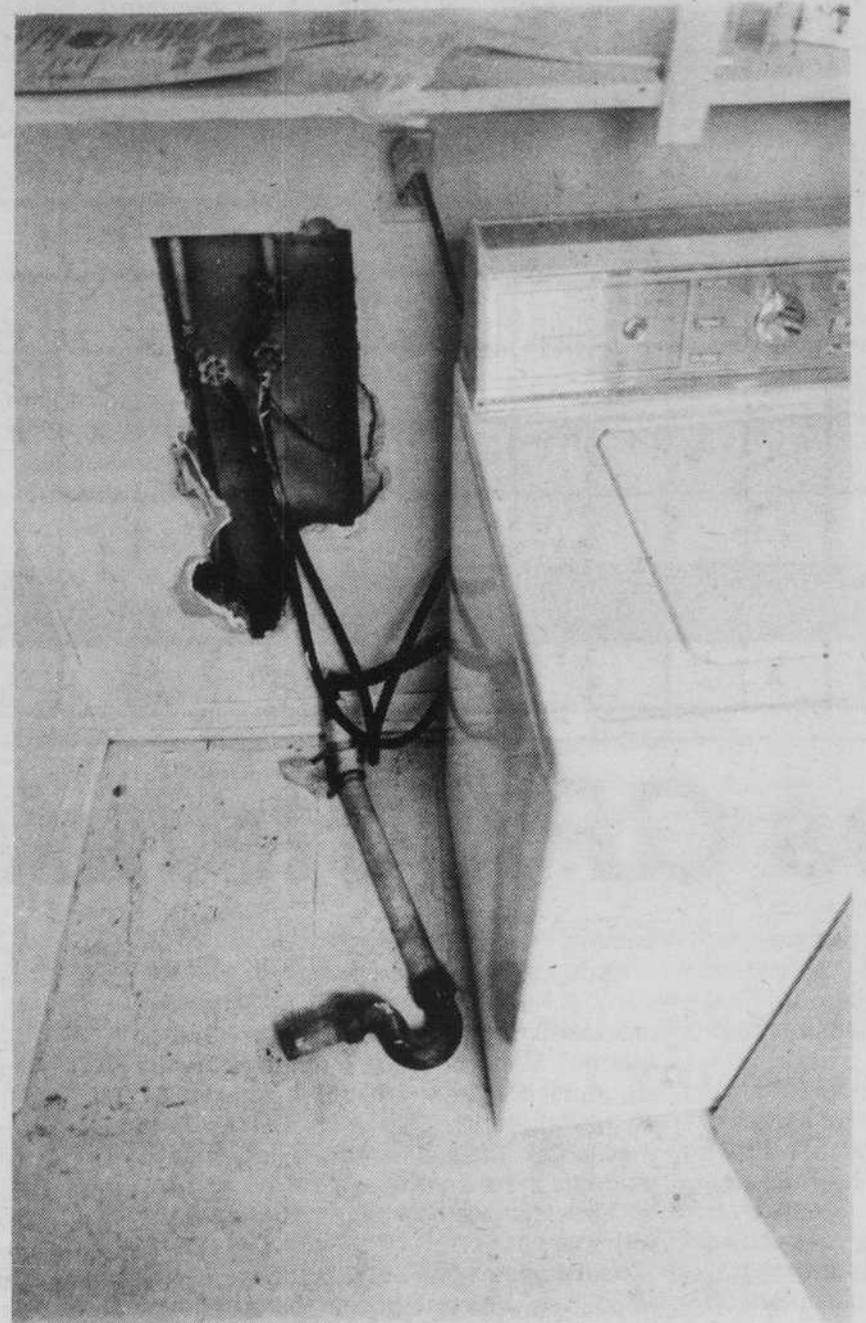


Photo by Steve Dykes

The washing machine is in disrepair in Horton's building.

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