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Olga Straight (left) and Steve Traylor voiced their opinions about a rent increase at a hearing last week in the EMU. Photo by Thomas Bergstrom

School housing rent to go up soon

By Martin Fisher
Oregon Daily Emerald

Students living in University housing will be paying more for rent beginning Sept. 1. The increased rents are because of routine maintenance costs, supporting a new family housing site at 18th Avenue and Agate Street, and a controversial \$300,000 administrative fee being assessed by the University.

Rents at the Westmoreland housing complex will increase \$25 per month, rents at the Amazon complex will rise \$20 per month and East Campus rents will increase as much as \$40 per month.

Rents for resident halls will increase for multiple rooms from \$3,339 per year to \$3,550, and single room rates will go from \$4,191 to \$4,435.

However, the increase is not sitting well with many tenants, particularly those in family housing.

Nancy Forrest, a member of the Amazon Tenant's Council and co-chairwoman of the Family Housing Board, said she believes students living in University housing are being unfairly singled out to generate additional revenue for the University.

"We're being taxed twice because we live in housing," she said. "Our fees are already going up because we're students, and our tuition is already going up. Now, simply by the fact we live in housing, we're being asked to subsidize the University."

Michael Eyster, University Housing director, said, "I don't like to charge my residents more than I have to," but said he understands why the University is assessing his department the \$300,000 fee.

Although the housing is entirely self-supporting and receives no money from either tuition or taxes, it does rely on the University to provide certain administrative services such as human resources administration, budgeting and bookkeeping.

And as the University faces the growing budget shortfall caused by 1990's Ballot Measure 5, it must look to other sources for revenue, Eyster said.

"The decision makers are faced with a terrible dilemma," he said. "I have to assume that this was the least unpalatable option of several unpalatable options."

Forrest doesn't buy that argument. "If that's the limited scope of their thinking, then they need to think harder," she said.

"This would be well and good if we were some of the richest students on campus," she said. "As a matter of fact, it's like a reverse sliding scale. Most of us are among the poorest students on campus."

Todd Newman-Barnhart of the Westmoreland Tenant's Council and co-chairman of the Family Housing Board, said the decision to charge the \$300,000 fee "isn't made on any sort of sound study."

"I don't know what basis it's made on," he said. "Nonetheless, they're assessing it, and the more I think about it, the more unfair it seems to me."

Newman-Barnhart said the University Budget Office could not provide him with specific costs for the support the University provides, and he said he believes the \$300,000 figure is merely an "educated guess."

Forrest, a graduate student in international studies, echoed that sentiment.

"When we have actually pressed them for specifics (and asked), 'How much do we cost?', they don't know," she said. "Most of their rationale so far has not been something they can show us on paper. They're asking us to totally trust them on this, and I'm sorry, I don't."

However, Dan Williams, University vice-president for

'It's really distressful. Most of us do not get help from home. We live on student loans and are supporting dependants.'

— Nancy Forrest,
Amazon Tenant's Council

administration, said the \$300,000 "is a very legitimate expense."

Williams said that, in the past, the University has not charged the full cost of services it provides.

"Now that the University continues to have this financial crisis, it's been decided that we ought to recover some of the indirect costs the University incurs" in providing administrative support, Williams said.

Williams acknowledged that the \$300,000 figure is not based upon any clearly documented costs, but said, "I'm sure the housing department enjoys more than \$300,000 worth of benefits from the indirect services the institution provides."

Williams said the University plans to study the actual costs during the 1993-94 school year.

"When we get a clearer definition," he said, "my guess is the amounts will be larger. It doesn't necessarily mean that we'll collect those."

Forrest said some housing administrators have told her that several departments are being asked to do their share in the wake of Measure 5 cutbacks and that accepting the assessment is the housing department's "duty."

"It's like this patriotic thing," she said. "They're saying because we live in housing it's our patriotic duty. But it's not our duty. We're already paying more — we're students."

"It would be like only taxing athletes, or only taxing people who take Spanish," she said.

Williams said he understands why some people are unhappy with the increase.

"It lends itself to a lot of misunderstanding," Williams said. "When you have never done it before, and you start doing it and it's reflected in people's (rental) rates, the response is 'What the hell is going on?'"

Eyster said he fears the increase will force some students to leave the University.

"Many of these people are, in fact, living in poverty and have come to the University as a means of pulling themselves and their families out of poverty through education," he said.

"At one point, they thought an education was within their grasp, and they had a possible means of pulling themselves out of poverty. Now, for at least some of our residents, they don't see a way they are going to be able to continue," Eyster said.

Forrest said many students in family housing do not have similar financial means as other students.

"It's really distressful," she said. "Most of us do not get help from home. We live on student loans and are supporting dependants."

Forrest also criticized the University for "backing away from its mandate to provide low-income housing for student families."

Forrest said she's aware of one Amazon tenant who sublets her apartment and, with her five children, lives in a tent during the summer. Forrest said the woman receives no financial aid during the summer and cannot afford to pay her rent.