

# Repairs at Amazon cheaper than building anew

By Sharon Singer Millman

I hope no one is fooled by the latest smokescreens the University administration has put up in front of the real issues at Amazon family housing.

The administration continues its wasteful policy of breakneck speed, reckless disregard for facts, logic, costs and students, and the insulting proliferation of student "advisory" committees.

The results of this process are building projects such as those at 18th Avenue and Agate Street, where the lowest rents (\$390 for a one-bedroom apartment, \$655 for a three-bedroom) are subsidized by increased rents for the rest of student housing. Agate, and the debt for Agate, is paid for entirely by student rents.

For the past two terms, University Housing has not permitted any of the more than 400 people on the waiting list for family housing to move into the dozens and dozens of unoccupied apartments at Amazon. Despite a prime on-campus location, squeaky new buildings, and a local rental vacancy rate of 1.4 percent, Agate remains, more than two months and a new term later, more than 60 percent unoccupied. The student housing market speaks.

What? Students with families? (Student families have been a big part of the University since World War II.) Rents more than \$400 are too high? What? Students who have no health insurance? Students who are already on food stamps? Where will all those cheaper-than-a-professor graduate teaching fellows (and

their families) live? Hey! Where did these people come from? Who let all these poor people into the University?

Looking back, we find the needs and concerns expressed by the G.I. Bill student families of the 1940s (that brought Amazon into existence in the first place) quite the same as those we face today. This situation is not a new one, and it is not going away any time soon.

Cheap rents at Amazon are a great financial incentive for attending the University and the best kind of financial aid for those trying to educate themselves out of poverty and unemployment in a rapidly changing regional economy.

"Hardships" brought on by higher rents are things like having to quit school and being unable to adequately clothe, feed or get health care for one's children. The best way to "offset" these hardships is not to bring them on. It would be so much easier for everyone if the administration would just do the right thing.

Unfortunately for the administration, the new engineering study of conditions at Amazon clearly shows that there is nothing — not roofs, foundations, fire walls or even asbestos abatement — at Amazon, where it is not cheaper to fix, replace or install than to do completely new construction, both in the short term (next year, next five years) and in the long term (next 50 years).

Although the cost of work for the two scenarios is actually very close, the difference in rent impact is dramatic: New con-

struction raises the rent at Amazon by about \$100 per month per unit for the next 50 years (starting next year!) over the rent impact of rehabilitation.

Why? Because financing a \$10 million debt for new construction is more expensive than financing a \$3 million investment in rehabilitation and a built-in reserve fund to provide proper maintenance, repair and replacement in the future. Add to this financial picture the fact that most students are taking out loans to pay their rent and you discover that every \$100 actually paid turns into \$150 of debt and interest to be paid back later.

And here is another twist: The administration is now also trying to buy out current residents by appealing to a limited sense of our own self-interest. "We'll keep your rent low until you graduate, if you move to Westmoreland. Of course, Westmoreland is already full and much farther away. You don't have to worry; we'll raise the rent on the next tenants."

That's pretty disgusting. Of course, I would love to have my personal rent stay right where it is, but I am not going to take my low rent and then stick it to the next group of unlucky sorts who live in University Housing next year and the year after for the next half of a century. Besides, sometime in the next 50 years, I hope my children and grandchildren will also be able to afford a university education.

Routine maintenance has not been done on Amazon for years. We'd happily settle for the \$3 million of overdue repair and

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the 50 years of lowest possible rents. Let the administration build cheap new family housing (if it can — we'd love to see it) on any of the many vacant properties available for that purpose. That might actually increase the amount of (affordable) student housing and it certainly wouldn't displace hundreds of people in the middle of the school year or destroy an entire neighborhood with a well-established history of student diversity, low-income access to education and cooperative community living.

The "evacuated" Amazon units represent nearly \$10,000 of lost housing revenue per month. There are 400 families on the waiting list. Strangely, the best buildings at Amazon are the first slated for demolition! The only thing this conspiracy theorist can imagine is that the administration is rushing forward because it doesn't want anyone to see what they're

doing. They have no intention of doing things right, and we are left with the bill.

Let's call a halt to this! Several state legislators and the Eugene-Springfield Homeless Action Coalition have joined the Amazon Community Tenants' Council impressing the administration for a moratorium on the evacuation and demolition of Amazon.

We urge the University to look at the facts. We urge the administration to reconsider its plans for Amazon. In the meantime, let people move into the empty units, and stop throwing good money after bad. Plan sensibly and economically for the future. Two-hundred-and-forty units of low-income student housing in the hand is worth \$20 million in the bush.

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## COMMENTARY

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