

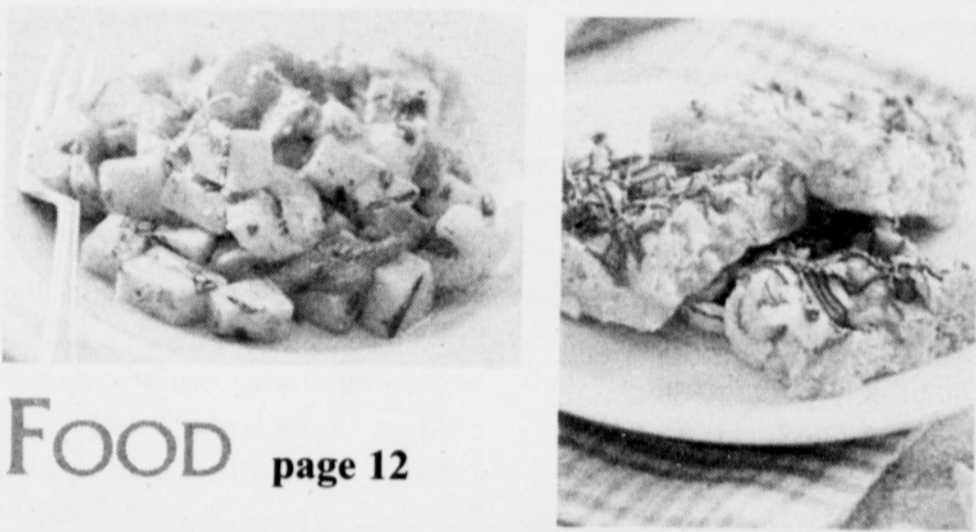
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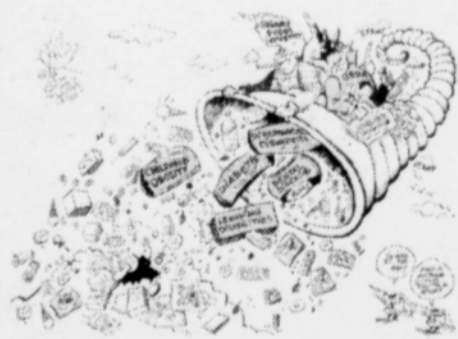
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What's on your list today?

LOCAL NEWS



Cristina Palacios, safe housing coordinator for the Oregon Community Alliance of Tenants, returns a call from a renter in distress.

Landlord-Tenant Conflicts

Economy puts strain on inspections

BY JAKE THOMAS
THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

Angela Lopez remembers when her home was making her child sick.

Lopez, a transplant from Mexico and mother of three, said she spent two years scrubbing mold her in small rental house in northeast Portland with Clorox and soap. But somehow the black fuzz always seemed to grow back on the walls and ceilings of the kitchen and bedrooms.

Her 5-year-old son's asthma, which had been dormant, came roaring back from the mold, according to Lopez. She said she complained to her landlord, who put a lamp-sized ventilation hole in the living room ceiling covered with metal grating, which she said made the dwelling frosty during the colder months.

After what she described as a fruitless back-and-forth with her

landlord, who she claimed repeatedly painted over the mold, she called the housing inspector and left several messages that she said weren't returned. Her final phone call was met with an automated voice telling her the message box was full, according to Lopez.

The heat only worked in her bedroom, she said, and the fluctuations between hot and cold exacerbated her child's condition. The staff at a local clinic told her that her house, which she shared with her husband, two other children, mother and father-in-law, was affecting her child's health. After much hand-wringing, she and her husband decided to break the lease with her landlord, who couldn't be reached for comment.

Contention has often marked relations between landlords and tenants, who occupy about 42 percent of Portland's housing. But as the Great Recession persists conflicts between the two have grown pricklier as money for housing inspectors has dried up.

As revenues have dropped off

for the Bureau of Development Services, the city agency has had to lay off building inspectors who keep dwellings inhabitable by enforcing the city's building code.

According to bureau spokesperson Ross Caron, housing inspectors have been reduced to five (about half) as a result of the cuts.

"We have experienced a slow down in our response time," said Caron.

He explained that the bureau has prioritized complaints it receives. For instance, a tenant who complains about a serious problem, like a lack of heat or a broken refrigerator would receive more immediate attention than other types of complaints.

However, complaints that are somewhere in between in severity will be responded to in five to 10 days, he said. A landlord will have 30 days to correct the problems. If they don't they will be assessed a fine that, depending on how many units are in the building, could be as high as \$500 a

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