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Firm's Report Deems Off-Campus Housing 'High Cost, Low Quality'

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Copy Editor

As Ohio University students continue to dominate the Athens rental-housing market, a 2006 study released by the university indicated off-campus housing is strained with high demand, limited supply and poor quality.

Of the 19,704 enrolled students in 2004 — the numbers used in the report — 11,756 reside in local rental housing and occupy approximately 86 percent of the rental properties in Athens, according to the Off-Campus Capacity Analysis. The university houses 7,231 students in on-campus facilities.

OU hired Brailsford & Dunlavey, a facility planning and program management firm serving educational institutions, to conduct the analysis for \$11,120.

The study found that the cost of off-campus housing is nearly \$2,000 to \$2,400 more expensive than living on-campus in a traditional single room, which is atypical compared to the national trend.

The off-campus housing situation rests mainly between Athens and the university, with each body having their own development plan. To provide adequate housing to support university enrollment, the study found that "coordination between the city and university is crucial."

The study researched all additional housing projects on file at the time, including the Summit at Coates Run complex, the Copper Beach apartments, the Palmer Place apartments and Mill Street Village. If completed, all the projects would add an additional 1,900 beds for OU students.

Mill Street Village is open, and the Palmer Place complex is under construction and expected to be finished in time for next school year. Legal complications are delaying the Summit at Coates Run complex, and the plans for the Copper Beach apartments have not progressed in several months.

Assuming all projects were completed, if the university were to significantly increase enrollment the report estimated that the Athens area could accommodate the projected growth of students. The housing market, however, would remain strained and continue to "present a high cost, low quality environment for university students."

Although in the fall of 2005 OU projected an increase of 2,896 students in enrollment by 2015, according to the report, the university has not made a final decision to do so.

Director of Admissions T. David Garcia said the university is marginally increasing enrollment by “trying to grow enrollment through regional campuses, Distance Learning and transfer students.” Since 2004, enrollment has grown by 442 students.

Beyond the problems created by the short supply of rental housing, student tenants often encounter legal trouble concerning their rental property. Mike Hess, associate director of Off-Campus Living, said his department works to help students understand their rights and responsibilities as a rental property tenant. He said a student’s rental experience depends on the property.

Steve Pierson, director of Code Enforcement, said the city regulates rental properties using a proactive and reactive system.

“We try to inspect every place every two years, but more often if there has been a complaint,” Pierson explained. In the event of a complaint, the city tries to respond quickly and often goes to check the property the same day, he said.

In the event of a legal issue with a rental property, students may contact The Center for Student Legal Services, which serves students with two full-time attorneys. Students can choose to pay an \$8 fee per quarter included in the tuition payment to take advantage of their services.

Managing Attorney for Student Legal Services Pat McGee said that while poor conditions are not the main issue his office handles, they are “definitely something we deal with.”

He explained that while the Athens Office of Code Enforcement does the best job possible to ensure quality housing given their resources and enforcement power, there will always be some places not abiding to code standards.

“Certain situations are not up to the code standards as they are supposed to be,” McGee said. “In general, problems occur with landlords packing students in and failing to maintain the property.