

Fix dorms now, health officials tell university

By Wayne Thibodeau, The Guardian

UPEI has been warned to make immediate repairs to its residence halls because the buildings the students call home could be making them sick.

An investigation by Environmental Health paints a dismal picture of life in residence at the university.

The report, obtained by The Guardian, says provincial government officials found significant amounts of water leaking through the ceiling, buckets set up in the hallways, ceiling tiles removed and a bad odour in the hallway which the report says is sometimes associated with wet or flooded carpeting.

Blanchard Hall, a three-storey brick building containing 63 two-bedroom apartments, was found to have "water leaking into buckets in the living room, there were obvious water stains on the ceiling and a hole where water had dripped through," the Environmental Health report states.

"Apparently, water leaking into this room eventually flooded into a room below on the second-floor on two different occasions."

The report warns the university to investigate and repair all water leaks "to prevent potential health hazards." It goes on to say "potentially harmful organisms such as mold may result from recurring water damage to building materials."

Environmental Health officials also asked the university to replace all gyprock, insulation and ceiling tiles and clean and dry wet carpet.

That report landed on the desk of Marc Braithwaite, general manager of UPEI Residence, Food and Conference Services.

Braithwaite said the university is taking the report "very seriously" and is in the process of making the necessary repairs. He said air-quality testing will also be carried out to ensure any mold has been removed.

"If the work hasn't already been carried out, it will be carried out," Braithwaite said. The university official explained an investigation of the problem revealed a mistake during a roofing repair job led to the water damage. He said contractors failed to seal a drain grade on the roof of the building.

Repairs were made but the roof continued to leak.

The roofing company was called back in to fix the problem.

"I think we've nailed the problem but it took them some time to identify where this water was coming from."

This isn't the first time the condition of the dorms has hit the news.

In November 2000, a mice infestation hit the dorms. Mouse mess was found, holes started to appear in walls and food was being snatched.

One student was even bitten.

Braithwaite maintains the residence halls are in good shape despite their age, however not everybody agrees.

A number of students The Guardian spoke to expressed concern about the state of the campus dorms, however many didn't want to go on the record.

Tristan Murray, a second-year math major who lives in Marian Hall, is an exception. He took the newspaper on a tour of the facilities which range from 30 to 45 years old.

Murray said he has no

regrets about choosing to live in residence but he said the buildings need work. He pointed to dirty carpet, some of which dates back to the 1970s, improperly insulated stairwells and an ever persistent odour in some parts of the building.

"When I got here, my first impression was that it was really bad," the 19-year-old said.

"But I got to live with it. It could definitely be better though."

He said he will be moving out at the end of this year.

Sandy Dutkosk, a first-year student from New Glasgow, N.S., said the buildings are definitely not worth what students pay to live in them.

Students pay about \$1,920 per semester or nearly \$600 a month to live in residence.

"I can't control the heat, it's not the cleanliest place, and it's expensive to live here," said Dutkosk.

Brandon MacKenzie, president of the UPEI Student Union, said he's hearing ongoing complaints about the condition of the residences, so much so that he thought about calling in the rental board.

MacKenzie said he was shocked to learn universities are exempt from the law.

The Rental of Residential Property Act clearly states that "premises provided by an educational institution to its students" are not covered in the act.

"It came as a shock to me that UPEI students are not protected under the law," said MacKenzie.

"Why is it that this university can't be kept to the same standard as other rental properties in the province? Why are UPEI students not afforded the same protection under the law?"

Braithwaite said improvements are on the horizon.

The university is set to announce plans to construct a new, \$7-million residence. Construction will start next summer and be completed in May 2005.

However, none of that money will come from the provincial government. The university had to come up with the money on its own.

There is also \$2.3 million budgeted to repair Bernardine Hall and Blanchard Hall over the next two years, again all of the money coming from student fees, not from the province.

Marian Hall is going to be converted into office space.

That means there is hope on the horizon for the 350 UPEI students who call residence halls home, but in the short-term, they may have to contend with the problems plaguing the buildings.

"I think if the facilities were unsound and unsafe and detrimental to anybody's well-being the university would not continue to operate them that way," Braithwaite said.