



Rooming house rules can save lives

Published on Jun 27, 2007

It was a zoning violation. But Roberto Maldini paid with his life.

Mr. Maldini died of smoke inhalation in a fire last Wednesday in the rooming house he owned on Steeles Avenue.

Markham's fire department had been in court against the home's owners since last September on charges they were violating the fire code by packing 15 people into 11 rooms in what was zoned as a single family home.

During one inspection, the fire department installed smoke and carbon monoxide detectors, devices that probably saved everyone else in the house.

While they are part of the landscape in Toronto, rooming houses are not associated with York Region. But as our communities change, they are likely to become more common.

The home at 98 Steeles Ave. E. was under investigation simply because it was a rooming house. It was sparked by a complaint from a neighbour.

Inspectors don't go looking to close rooming houses unless there is a complaint. After all, it puts on the street people who are likely to have trouble finding another place to live in the region.

But clearly there was more wrong with this home than the fact rooms were being rented out. The cause of the fire, which did \$800,000 damage has been traced to faulty wiring.

We don't know more than that about the wiring, but it stands to reason that if a home is being converted to multiple units and doing so goes against municipal zoning, then wiring and other key components will be done without proper inspection.

But right now, Markham has only started to review its ban on new basement apartments.

Other than inspecting the basement units that were built under the NDP in the early 1990s, the town continues to ban a form of housing that is common not only in Markham, but across the region.

Newmarket, among other Ontario towns, legalized basement units to ensure they are inspected for safety.

The town must create a policy to regulate multi-unit rooming houses, before they become as common as "illegal" basement apartments.

The challenge is, of course, that many neighbourhoods will prefer the status quo — no rooming houses allowed.

Markham has just completed a long and contentious process of banning cosmetic pesticides. This is another set of regulations that could take years to pass.

Let's hope Markham and the other municipalities in York Region get working on bylaws that allow safe rooming houses that have a reasonable number of tenants and are inspected regularly.

Nobody should have to risk his life to have an affordable home.