

Campus and Community Commission
Report to Ames City Council: Landlord Tenant Relations
April 21, 2021

Direction from City Council:

In March of 2019, City Council directed the Campus and Community Commission to evaluate the state of landlord/tenant relations in the City of Ames. Specific requests in the charge included:

- Information on what students need to know about the rental process and tenant responsibilities
- Locations of where relevant informational resources about the rental process exist
- Discussion between student renters and landlords facilitated by the Commission
- Reporting to the City Council regarding assessment and outcome of the discussion

Following initial discussions with leaders from university representatives such as Student Legal Services, the Dean of Students Office, and Student Government, as well as input from Ames PD and City Inspection, the commission recommended reviving the mediation service for tenant/landlord disputes, and investigating the need for more publicly available information about the rental process, including understanding the terms and conditions of leases.

During a May 2020 City Council meeting, Council recommended the Commission to find ways to revamp and promote the Rent Smart Ames website, and also a report on potential expansion of mediation services that could be made available in rental disputes.

Steps Taken:

Rent Smart Ames Website:

A survey about the effectiveness and interest in the Rent Smart Ames website was sent to a random sample of 35 landlords, and 288 students. The following is a summary of the results.

Landlord Survey Results:

Regarding use of the website, all thirteen (13) respondents said that they do not use the Rent Smart Ames website to advertise vacancies. Vacancies are advertised on their personal website, using yard signs, and via social media. Respondents said they did not use the apartment locator on the Rent Smart Website and instead use website with a higher search engine optimization such as Zillow or apartments.com.

Respondents indicated that educational material contained on the website was the most helpful; including but not limited to tenant rights and responsibilities, roommate agreements, and budgeting. Seventy-five (75) percent of respondents said this information was easy to find with twenty-five (25) percent saying it was not. Explanation for those stating the material was not easy to find included a variety of input on how/why the website would benefit from being consolidated.

Respondents were also asked what information they would like to see added or taken off. Multiple respondents indicated that they would see benefit in there being a contact for tenants to call or email with questions and concerns. Others gave input that they would like to see the language on the site better reflect that of the tenant code and highlight information regarding emotional support animals.

Through discussion of the results of the survey, the Commission agreed that being mindful of producing purely educational content and not crossing over into the realm of legal advice is important as revisions to the website are being made.

Student Survey Results:

Of the students surveyed, 92.4% reported not being aware of the Rent Smart Ames website prior. When asked how they found their current living situation, responses overwhelmingly pointed to resources such as social media (21%), friend referrals (44%), and direct browsing on apartment/property management websites (44%).

In an open ended question requesting suggestions for how to make the site more valuable to student visitors, the following themes emerged in the responses:

Tenant Education, Examples of Lease/Rental Agreements, Information on how to get out of a lease, Better Pricing information, Apartment Reviews from Previous Tenants*

*Popularity of requested apartment searches and reviews will be addressed in the section below.

Mediation:

During a meeting with landlords at Ames Pizza Ranch attendees described a previous program provided through the Center for Creative Justice (CCJ) where mediation was provided for landlord and tenant disputes. It was described as very successful and allowed resolution of disputes in an informal manner.

Subsequent to this discussion, Michael Levine, an attorney with Iowa State University Student Legal Services (SLS) attended a Campus and Community Commission meeting. It was shared by Michael Levine, without prompting, that the informal dispute resolution process offered previously through CCJ as a more successful means to resolve student-landlord disputes as

compared to litigation. Paul Johnson, the second attorney in SLS was contacted for his recommendation by Commission member Pete Englin. Both Michael and Paul have over twenty years of experience providing free legal advice/service to Iowa State University. The time and cost associated with litigation requires students to make difficult decisions on sometimes legitimate complaints. They both fully endorse community provided mediation as a highly effective process and service.

Actions Recommended:

Rent Smart Ames Website:

The commission recommends consolidating the Rent Smart Ames website into a simple presentation of information that focuses solely on rental information and best practices for signing leases and ending rental agreements. The commission recommends that city staff assume responsibility of maintenance of the Rent Smart Ames website to ensure up-to-date information.

Due to lack of interest from landlords to list properties on the Rent Ames service, and due to student behavioral reporting that they look for properties elsewhere, the commission is recommending discontinuing the property search function on the website. Additionally, because other resources, such as the *Iowa State Daily*, are now actively promoting a property search service on their website, the commission is suggesting the Rent Smart Ames site make rental education its single priority.

Additionally, because student usage data was low, but post-survey interest high, we recommend working with university channels to make the Rent Smart Ames website available through resources provided by university offices such as Student Legal Services, and link to Rent Ames from any applicable campus website.

The commission recommends Jayce Johnson work with university groups to add this website to any student-facing resources to promote the Rent Ames website.

Mediation Recommendation:

It is the recommendation of the Campus and Community Commission that an informal complaint structure be explored and if feasible, instituted as a first step community referral location for tenant and landlord disputes.