

Home Rule Borough of Edinboro

Reasoning For Placing Restrictions on New Student Rentals in 2008

The Borough of Edinboro is a small rural municipality located about ten miles south of Lake Erie. Edinboro has a population of about 6500 residents and is the host to Edinboro University of Pennsylvania (EUP), a PASHE school of about 8500 full-time equivalent students. As of the 2000 census, only 36% of Borough residents own their homes, so, nearly 75% of our residents are renters. 90% of our renters are students.

The median house-hold income of Edinboro is only \$33,574 (among the lowest in all of Erie County). EUP pays no taxes to the Borough but owns 40% of our 2.5 square miles. That alone presents a huge financial challenge. In order for the Borough to be able to afford to provide adequate emergency services, it is critical that we preserve what remains of our over-burdened tax base. It is also critical that we retain/attract enough able-bodied adults to serve our all-volunteer Fire Department that EUP and the municipality depend on.

Many of our transient student renters live in apartments, but, over the years many of our limited stock of single family houses have slowly but surely been converting to student rentals. Many of our single family house owners have elected to move out of the Borough, to seek peace and quiet and/or to avoid paying higher municipal taxes. Many of our former residents rent out their vacated single family house to students or have sold their former homes to business people who have had that intent. The result is less revenue to the Borough of Edinboro.

The overwhelming majority of our student renters pay very little in taxes (their income taxes, if any, goes to their home of record, which is usually not Borough of Edinboro). At the same time the student renter demographic place a disproportionate demand for services such as police and code enforcement. As a result, the taxes have to be increased for everyone. The higher taxes further discourage families from living in the Borough and downward spiral cycle continues. This trend is substantiated in an independent study published in 2006 by the Pennsylvania Economy League (PEL). Edinboro was one of five case studies examined by the PEL researchers.

The Borough of Edinboro Borough Council wanted to place limits on the establishment of new student rentals within our very limited stock of single family houses/duplexes/conversion dwellings. At the same time, Edinboro Council wanted to encourage students to reside either on-campus or in off-campus multi-family dwellings (apartments).

In general, apartment living is much better suited for the college student lifestyle and apartment owners typically do a much better job monitoring and controlling the bad behavior of their renters, especially in comparison to the absentee landlords of single-family houses. Limiting new student rental houses to present levels helps keep the situation from getting too far out of control and helps to preserve and protect our tax base needed to pay for the essential services required for public health, safety, and welfare of all our residents. Limiting new student rentals also helps preserve what remains of the peace and tranquility of our traditional family neighborhoods and helps Edinboro attract and keep families.

Parking problems and noise issues further discourages would-be homeowners from remaining in the Borough. To illustrate this, let's take a two story house that is converted to a rental property. It would typically be converted to two or more separate apartments and would house six or more students. Each student typically has an automobile. Parking becomes very difficult especially when friends spend the night and contribute to the parking problem. If they throw a party, then all hell really breaks loose. Cars can be found on lawns and all over the neighborhood narrow streets with two wheels of each car on a neighbor's lawn. This of course is very troublesome to neighbors who would like to preserve their neighborhood for families with children and for those who prefer a quiet neighborhood in which to reside in their retirement years.

College kids like to drive fast and they are often oblivious to the danger they pose to others. Children are much safer playing in neighborhoods where cars are not speeding up and down the residential streets and where excess cars are not parked along the streets to obscure a vehicle operator from noticing a child chasing a ball into the street.

Family oriented neighborhoods should not have to endure loud college parties and the drunken behavior that frequently goes hand in hand with them. We could hire more police officers, but, additional police are expensive and our municipal taxes are already among the highest in Erie County. Studies show that we should have eleven full-time officers, but, we can only afford eight officers who must cover three eight-hour shifts, 24 hours per day, 360 days per year. Our already over-burdened police do not need the addition of yet more student rental properties.

Single family rental properties are typically absent of the pride of ownership by their absentee landlords. A house containing many renters is typically an eye-sore with empty unkempt lawns and shrubs strewn with empty alcohol beverage containers. We, all too often, find trash cans overflowing with garbage or knocked over in plain view of passers-by. Young renters typically forget to take the trash to the curb on trash day and the trash at the side of the house, or on the front porch, becomes an unsightly mountain of stench. Animals make matters worse by opening bags and tipping containers etc. Trash is then strewn or blown throughout the neighborhood.

The worst offenders are scolded or cited by the Code Enforcement Officer, but, that does not make the trash disappear until the next weekly trash day. We could hire additional code enforcement personnel, but that would not fix the root cause of the problem. Nor would it be affordable for an already overburdened tax base.

Family oriented neighborhoods once neat, clean, quiet and wholesome rapidly deteriorate into neighborhoods with loud, rowdy and drunken behavior with unkempt yards with cars parked all over the place. The trend of increasing conversion of single family houses is definitely not in the best interest of Borough or its homeowners. Most homeowners would prefer to preserve their quiet small-town neighborhoods.

Therefore, the Borough Council has elected to enact legislation limiting the numbers of single family houses that will be permitted to convert to rental properties. In this way, Council can help protect the public health, safety, and welfare of our residents.

Edinboro's legislation will help preserve our traditional family housing stock for non-student purposes thereby helping to preserve our small town. Placing limits on future conversions of single family houses to student rental properties will help keep our neighborhoods to a manageable mix, and will reduce frustration and the chance for conflicts that happen between student renters and their retired and/or family oriented neighbors.

Edinboro University of Pennsylvania (EUP) is finally starting to help matters by improving the quality/desirability of their on-campus housing and by requiring freshman and sophomores to live on-campus. When housed in traditional on-campus student housing and off-campus apartments, students will not likely disrupt the peace and quiet of family-oriented neighborhoods nor will they displace the heart of our municipal tax base.

Since enacting restrictions on new student rentals there has been a significant increase in development of vacant lots and rehabilitating or rebuilding older homes. Property owners now feel comfortable that the house next door will not become a student rental and they are more willing to renovate and improve their homes.

In closing, I would like to emphasize that a "one size fits all" doesn't work when you are dealing with student housing in varying municipalities of varying sizes and non-university towns, etc. Please consider that the needs of the many should always far-outweigh the concerns/desires of a very select group of rental property owners. If Pennsylvania were to enact legislation prohibiting municipalities from placing restrictions on student rentals, it will reverse our progress and pose a tremendous danger to small municipalities that are already struggling financially due to the unique burdens of hosting a large tax exempt entity. Pennsylvania does not need more municipalities seeking participation in Act 47 and otherwise heading toward insolvency just to appease those in the student rental industry looking to expand their holdings.

If you have additional questions, I can be reached at (814) 734-1812, ext. 126.

Thank you for your time and for considering the concerns the Borough of Edinboro and the Pennsylvania State Association of Boroughs (PSAB).

Sincerely,

Taras (TJ) Jemetz
Manager, Borough of Edinboro