

Residents to fight Pembina Hall closure

by Brian Tucker

Residents of Pembina Hall are protesting a lack of consultation in a board of governors decision to close down the residence effective April 30.

The board reached the decision at its Dec. 7 meeting, based on a recommendation by general faculties council committee on housing and food services.

That same day, residents were informed of the board's decision and were told they must vacate the premises by April 30 so renovations may take place.

In the meantime, the board is studying alternative uses for the building, one of the campus' oldest, now exclusively a senior and undergraduate women's residence.

"We recognize the need for renovations but there should be a place for mature students for next year," said Linda Spencer, a spokesperson for about 100 residents of Pembina.

"Most of the people are worried because they don't know what is going to happen," says Spencer, a graduate student in community development.

She says a Tanzanian student moved out of Pembina Hall during Christmas break "because she didn't want to have to look for housing in April during exam week."

Spencer sent a letter to the board expressing concern that a decision seriously affecting the future of the residents was made when they "have had no opportunity to discuss the matter with you or to advance alternatives."

She says Pembina Hall meets special needs of mature women students: It has a central location, its tranquility provides a good atmosphere for studying, and it has easier life style.

That style softens the blow of adjustment foreign students must face in an unfamiliar culture.

"Those who first come to Edmonton, and can only arrive at the beginning of September, must have some place to go."

At first, most students dislike the rundown surroundings but "they have really come to appreciate the friendships made here."

Other existing facilities fall short of meeting the needs of older students.

Lister Hall is too noisy and has a younger population, she says. "In HUB they have to keep house for themselves."

"And some people do not prefer separate apartments."

It appears residents want to stay put, despite restrictions placed upon them.

Due to archaic electrical wiring, they are forbidden to cook in the building and to use appliances in their rooms, except for one 60- and one 40-watt light bulb. Spencer admits this is often inadequate light to study by.

"I don't want the nuisance of having to pack my things and find somewhere else to go," says Marion Shaar, although she expects to find another place

without too much difficulty.

Spencer hopes that Pembina doesn't follow the university's two other old residences, Assiniboia and Athabasca, which were converted to office use.

"Pembina could be used either as a residence or an archives building. But it would somehow seem to stay more alive if people would live here all the time. A museum would make it a dead place."

A final decision on Pembina Hall remains to be made later this month, according to William Neal, vice-president planning and development.

Renovations required to upgrade the residences include new electrical wiring, plumbing and heating systems, and

installation of doors and partitions made of a more fire-proof material and a new sprinkler system.

The cost of renovations, as well as alternative uses for the building, are being studied by the board's building committee and by campus development, says Neal.

However, a major roadblock to renovations has been the lack of funds. According to Neal, the university would have to borrow the money because it couldn't get a grant from the government.

This would likely lead to higher rents to cover the mortgage and loan, he says.

However, "there is a real possibility that Pembina Hall will remain residential," comments Neal, whose term expires at the end of May.

"We should do all we can to retain them for residential purposes."

After studying the housing needs of students, it is possible that two of the three buildings will be used for residences, the other for general university space.

These needs are being examined by two administrative committees one of which is conducting a housing survey.

Of the three, Neal noted, Pembina would require the least amount of money to renovate, as it is still structurally sound.

Neal emphasized that the board's decision was not a long-term one, but that renovations were necessary and it would have to be vacated at the end of the academic year.

Maintenance of the residence already takes a big chunk out of the budget, reports Housing and Food Services, which is responsible for operating university buildings.

"It's expensive in manpower and is a constant source of worry," says David Young, the service's administrative officer.

The fact that Pembina Hall residents are entitled to food at SUB cafeterias "costs a pile of dough."

"They are getting food at retail prices and getting room and board at wholesale prices," says Young, who estimates the university receives about 35 cents a day from room and board.

However, Young includes himself in the list of those who support continued maintenance of Pembina Hall, which also includes university archivist James Parker.

Parker, who lived in the adjoining Athabasca Hall and confessed to involvement in several of the extra-curricular activities between the residences, says Pembina is "one of the old centres of student life on campus."

"I would like to see all the residences preserved, especially Pembina."



Pembina Hall, home for many, closes its doors April 30.

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