

Greeks use loans to fire-proof houses

The university is offering zero-interest loans to Greek organizations as an incentive to upgrade fire safety equipment in their houses.

Most of the USC-owned Greek residential buildings have been updated with fire safety systems through a program the university began 10 years ago, but renovations to privately owned Greek houses were not covered. Though the university does not normally take on the role of a lending institution, officials said fire safety is an important enough issue to justify making the loans.

"At USC, safe housing for our students is a priority," President Steven B. Sample wrote last spring in a letter to fraternity and sorority chapters.

Sample launched the interest-free loan program last spring to motivate sororities and fraternities whose houses are privately owned to improve their safety standards. Any Greek house that is affiliated with the school and recognized by USC qualifies for the \$300,000 loan program, said William Regensburger, director of fire safety and emergency planning.

Four Panhellenic Council sorority chapters have already secured a loan through the program: Pi Beta Phi, Kappa Kappa Gamma, Alpha Chi Omega and Gamma Phi Beta, said Eddie North-Hager, a USC media representative. USC officials said more chapters are considering participating in the loan program, but would not identify them.

Interfraternity Council Vice President of Public Relations John Legittino said Phi Delta Theta, Sigma Phi Epsilon and Theta Xi fraternities are also considering applying for the loan.

"A lot of fraternities don't have resources to do this," Legittino said. "No interest financing is the best way to go."

USC officials said it was especially important that fraternities act upon USC's loan offer for the upgrades. Fire-related deaths in fraternity houses are more common than fire-related deaths anywhere else on campuses across the nation, Regensburger said.

"We've never had a fire fatality, and we would like to keep it that way," Regensburger said.

Although USC has never reported a fire-related death, a fire did destroy much of the vacant PhiDelt fraternity house in spring 2005. The fraternity plans to take USC's loan offer to incorporate fire safety mechanisms into its new house, which is under construction and will be completed next fall.

"I think the fraternity should take advantage of this because President Sample is being so generous. I mean, why not?" PhiDelt President Ali Shorooghi said.

The university has structured loan repayment plans that take five to 10 years to pay back, and officials said it will negotiate individual plans with each Greek chapter that takes out a loan.

The effort to improve residential buildings' safety started 10 years ago when USC made a commitment to install new fire sprinklers in all of its 60 residential buildings at a cost of tens of millions of dollars, Regensburger said. Upgrades need to be completed in only two remaining buildings and those renovations will be finished by next summer, he said.

Of the 25 Greek houses on The Row, six fraternity houses are owned by the school and all have been updated with fire safety equipment, said Denzil Suite, associate vice president of Student Affairs.

But Regensburger said because most of the Greek houses are privately owned, they were not part of the original plan to upgrade the residential buildings.

USC officials said these buildings need fire safety renovations because some of the oldest ones have no safety equipment, and others have not been upgraded since they were built. None of the buildings are legally required to be renovated for fire safety because building codes at the time most of them were built did not have fire safety standards.

"Many of those [buildings] were built in the 1880s; they aren't modern houses and don't have the facilities. ... They have doors and windows and floors, and that's it," said Mark Ewalt, director of operations for USC Auxillary Services.

Ewalt said the houses need to add sprinklers to each bedroom and hallway, improve access to fire exits or update fire alarms and smoke detectors, costing as much as \$300,000. The costs for a new system vary, and can rise sharply with larger houses or when water pipes that supply the sprinklers need to be moved.

Regensburger said once Greek chapters take out the loan, the installation of a fire safety system takes six to eight weeks.

But some houses need more work than others. Though Gamma Phi added sprinkler systems through the loan program this summer, it will take two more summers to complete all the fire safety renovations in the sorority, said chapter President Sarah Wilson. Wilson said a complete update requires moving water pipes within the house structure, and the sorority cannot undergo renovations without displacing its members who live in the house.

"We can't be living in our house [while construction goes on]," she said. "They have to tear up walls and ceilings," Wilson said.

Representatives from chapters that have completed the program said they are excited about the results.

"It makes our house a safer place to gather, conduct meetings and live," Lauren Evans, president of Pi Phi, wrote in an e-mail.