

Boston presses colleges for details on addresses

Council targets off-campus units

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The Boston City Council on Wednesday voted to require colleges with a presence in Boston to provide a list of off-campus addresses where students are residing, in a step intended to fight chronic overcrowding and protect the health and safety of the thousands of students living in the city.

The measure was approved three months after a Boston Globe Spotlight Team investigation, “Shadow Campus,” revealed that illegal, overcrowded apartments with hazardous conditions riddle the city’s university neighborhoods, including a large number in violation of a zoning rule that prohibits more than four full-time undergraduates from sharing a house or apartment.

After a fire at an off-campus apartment in Allston last year killed 22-year-old Binland Lee, a Boston University student, community activists called on colleges in Boston to release the addresses of their off-campus students to enable the city to build a database that could be used to detect dangerous, overcrowded living conditions.

Most universities resisted until June, when Mayor Martin J. Walsh met with college leaders and they largely agreed to disclose the addressees. City Councilor Josh Zakim then proposed formalizing the arrangement by amending the city’s University Accountability Ordinance, which requires colleges to provide a breakdown of the number of students living in each ZIP code.

Now, the institutions will need to include the address and unit number for student apartments, as well as whether the individual is an undergraduate or graduate student, by Nov. 15 each fall, and within 45 days of the beginning of each semester or quarter.

It is an anonymous report and no student names will be included.

“Knowing the specific addresses, including the unit number, is really going to give the city the tools to monitor the overcrowding,” Zakim said. “Often these overcrowded apartments have unsafe, unsanitary conditions and higher rents. When you cram so many students into an apartment, few families can compete with that. It has a really troubling impact on the city.”

Devin Quirk, director of operations for the Department of Neighborhood Development, said the revised ordinance will add permanence to the mayor’s push to collect student address data by setting it into law.

The city has already started to analyze the addresses provided this summer by 26 universities, including Boston College and Northeastern University, to determine which apartments may be overcrowded.

“Our early analysis identified approximately 2,000 students living in housing that is ‘at-risk’ for overcrowding,” Quirk said. “As our investigation into this continues, the actual number will likely be less.”

Valerie K. Frias, associate director of the Allston Brighton Community Development Corporation, who testified at a City Council hearing on Tuesday and has been pushing for the student address database since Lee’s death in a Linden Street residence last year, said she is extremely pleased by the council’s measure.

“It will make a big difference in terms of the city’s ability to respond to overcrowding and unsafe conditions,” Frias said. “It will give them an additional tool they need to identify those problem properties and be able to get in to them and assess conditions in a much more efficient manner.”

The number of undergraduate and graduate students living off campus in Boston jumped by 36 percent, to more than 45,000, between 2006 and last year, according to reports filed

with the city clerk by private universities with a Boston presence and data that three public colleges provided the Globe. Many of the additional students are pouring into neighborhoods such as Mission Hill, Fenway, and Brighton.

The “Shadow Campus” series found widespread health and safety issues at apartments, ranging from the kind of deadly peril that claimed Lee to more ordinary hazards. A Globe analysis of records found that four student-rich ZIP codes, when adjusted for population, have 50 percent more complaints overall than the citywide average in more than a dozen categories, including mold and mice infestation, missing or broken carbon monoxide detectors, and overcrowding.

Lee’s family filed a wrongful death lawsuit against the landlord and a real estate company on Wednesday in Suffolk Superior Court that accuses them of renting an illegal apartment with insufficient exits and a faulty fire-alarm system.

“The tragic events on Linden Street in my district last year just highlighted the problems that we have with overcrowding and landlords that don’t take care of their property,” City Councilor Mark Ciommo, who cosponsored the amendment with Zakim, said at the hearing on Tuesday. “It also highlights the overabundance of students in our neighborhoods.”