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Big Brother gets into home inspections

Stanton decrees that its inspectors will decide when a house is fit to sell

Under the guise of protecting residents' health and safety, the city of Stanton has passed an onerous new law that mandates city inspections of every home before its sale for building code violations. Residents must pay \$150 for the inspection, and if the house fails, more fees for future inspections until the city grants its OK.

As the local Realtors association points out in a mailing to residents, "These special inspection enforcers have the right to inspect every inch of your home, including bedrooms, bathrooms and even inside your closets. They also have the authority to report anything they find suspicious to other local and federal agencies."

The ordinance requires exterior inspections, but the city also can extend the inspection to the home's interior.

That might fly in certain unfree countries, but is too Big-Brother-ish for our freedom-loving tastes.

The inspections can actually cost far more than the \$150 per-visit fee. Even City Manager Jake Wager, the driving force behind the ordinance, agrees that if inspectors find an unpermitted room addition, they can force residents to make structural changes or even demolish the addition. This can cost thousands of dollars. There is no timeframe provided in the ordinance, which means that every home seller in Stanton is dependent on the schedules of government inspectors. This can delay and even lose sales for property owners.

This is a heavy-handed approach to a nonexistent problem and really is "a pure fund-raiser," says Matt Petteruto, director of public affairs for the Apartment Owners Association of Orange County. As he explains it, the goal of the city is to find unpermitted renovations and add them to the tax rolls. City officials use the guise of public safety to gain support for the plan.

Had officials been on solid ground about safety concerns, they would not have pushed through this city ordinance so quietly. Realtors and other interested groups were not specifically notified of the proposal and given a chance to respond. We understand why. A public firestorm might have ensued.

The Realtors are trying to get the ordinance repealed. They and the apartment owners also are trying to stop a new proposal by Stanton officials that would require an annual inspection of every apartment unit in the city.

Typically, when a person sells a house, the real estate contract encourages the hiring of a home inspector. Various other inspections are required. The market takes care of this without the need of meddlesome government employees on a hunt for more tax revenue. Only one other Orange County city, Newport Beach, requires a presale inspection.

"It's not the houses that are turning over that have the safety problems," notes Phil Hawkins, vice president of the Pacific West Association of Realtors. New buyers tend to check out properties carefully and typically invest in renovations after they buy them. Punishing people for selling their homes will only make it less likely that individuals will invest in Stanton.

Mr. Hawkins wonders why Stanton doesn't follow the example of its neighbor, Anaheim, and try working with homeowners to encourage improvements rather than using threats and fees. Anaheim, also an older city with many hard-on-the-heels areas, understands that the key to encourage new vitality is to encourage people to invest in their neighborhoods by reducing rules and fees.

The Stanton City Council should take a field trip to Anaheim City Hall, where they might learn that Big Brother will not turn Stanton into Villa Park.