

Minimum Standards for Hotel/Motels: Repair of the Weakest Link

By Becky Mauldin, R.S., Health/Code Enforcement Officer, City of Granbury

"Come visit our attractions!"

"Spend your money in our shops and restaurants!"

"How 'bout a fall festival on the historic downtown square?"

And better yet: "Spend the night in one of our hotels"

(so that you can do the same thing tomorrow)!

Convention and visitor bureaus use the latest marketing tools to promote cities. We have electronic billboards, radio and television advertising, and colorful print ads galore. As cities, we work extremely hard to brand our tourism "niche." We are many different cities with the common goal of providing attractive destinations and bringing visitors to our communities.

As a growing, scenic, city-on-the-lake, Granbury did just that. Granbury boasted of a beautiful historic downtown square; a new, white sandy beach; a state-of-the-art, 1,500-square-foot conference center facility; lakeside

boardwalks; parks and ball fields; and to top it off, a small-town charm that is hard to beat.

Over the span of approximately four years, five new hotels were built in Granbury, making the total number of hotel guest rooms top the charts at approximately 700 in 2008. Around that same time, the natural gas industry had marked its arrival in Hood County, bringing hundreds of blue-collar laborers and professionals in need of long-term accommodations.

It didn't take long for the city to notice not only the "boom," but also the toll on local hotel properties. The rooms were filling up, and so was the log of visitor complaints. This trend was especially notable immediately following the Fourth of July festivities in 2008. Complaints ranged from bed bugs to bad coffee, torn carpet to broken bed frames. Here we were, bringing record numbers of visitors to our city, only to leave them—in many cases—extremely disappointed in their overnight accommodations. The advertising and first impressions may have been good, but by neglecting the last (and weakest) link in our tourism chain, we were encouraging our visitors to go elsewhere. It became a priority to repair this weak link, so after much documentation, many photos, brainstorming, and research, a draft ordinance evolved.

A session presenting this ordinance at the 2010 Texas Association of Convention and Visitors Bureaus Mid-Winter Conference was well-attended and well-received. Attendees seemed eager to determine how a Hotel Minimum Standards ordinance may be an overlooked need in their local hotels, and how they may implement a similar ordinance in their cities.

The Granbury Hotel Minimum Standards Ordinance was presented to Granbury City Council in January 2009 and was unanimously approved. The ordinance established minimum standard criteria for all rooming establishments with eight or more rooms, within the corporate boundary of the city, and required a permit for their operation. Initially,



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hotels were given 45 days to apply for a hotel permit, and permits were either issued or denied within 60 days.

In an effort to facilitate open communication between the hoteliers and the city, the ordinance was immediately presented at a regularly scheduled Hotelier Association Meeting. Once introduced to the nature of the complaints and scope of the problems that prompted the ordinance, it appeared that the general consensus was that "raising the bar" via this ordinance would benefit all hotels, new or older, in the long-run. For the next two to three months, many of the hotels were busy preparing for inspection. Several of them worked together in locating contractors and coordinating to "share" contractors working on similar jobs.

Within a month, and in response to comments from hoteliers and staff, the ordinance was amended slightly. The original ordinance included language limiting the percentage of a hotel's rooms that could be rented as "extended stay," or more than 30 consecutive days, to 5 percent of guest rooms. The reason for this cap was two-fold: first, to limit the number of rooms from which no occupancy tax revenue would be generated; and second (and more importantly), to ensure that each room would be vacated and cleaned in its entirety at least every 30 days. It was determined that an increase in the maximum

percentage of rooms to be let as extended-stay from 5 percent to 25 percent would be more agreeable, and city council concurred.

The new ordinance also limited any guest's stay to 365 consecutive days. The intent was to discourage the trend of an increasing number of rooms being used as "apartments"; to encourage long-term occupants to look at multi-family dwellings or rental options instead.

The first round of hotel inspections under the new minimum standards began in March, and the improvements over 60 days were remarkable. Several properties had replaced old, rotting wood; scraped and painted the exteriors of their buildings; and repaired soffits, roofs, and gutters. Others flaunted newly planted shrubbery, filled pot-holes, repaired sidewalks, or painted parking lot stripes. Air conditioners, mattresses, and broken or discarded furniture were no longer found piled adjacent to dumpsters or in empty rooms.

The improvements on the exteriors of the properties were certainly notable. However, many of the interior improvements exceeded expectations to the degree that many rooms were barely recognizable.

Several hotels replaced the carpeting and tile in all rooms. Others replaced worn, soiled, or damaged furniture, mattresses, curtains, and bedding. A common upgrade was

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the replacement of old metal bed frames with platform beds. These beds not only cut down on housekeepers' cleaning time, but also eliminate a majority of the dust, paper, and even personal belongings that accumulate under the beds. In addition, several hotels followed the recommendation to use zippered mattress bags in an effort to decrease the likelihood of bed bug transmission. Furniture with broken corners or inoperable drawers was replaced with new, updated pieces.

Bathroom fixtures, tiling, and vanities were even replaced in some hotels, upgrading from old laminate to granite. Appliances—such as microwaves, mini-refrigerators, and irons—were replaced with newer, nicer versions.

Thanks to new lighting fixtures, previously dimly lit rooms now showed off new lampshades free of cigarette burns, dust, and stains. Many of the hotels did extensive painting, and others simply touched up.

Beside the minimum standards pertaining to the aesthetics of the hotels, there were also other issues specifically addressed by the ordinance. Prior to the new ordinance, a common problem had been the use of guest rooms as "storage rooms" for broken furniture, appliances, and miscellaneous items. The new standard states that no more than ten percent of rooms may be used as storage rooms,

thereby leaving a minimum of 90 percent of guest rooms available for occupancy or in use at all times.

Another trend that had been observed, especially during the summer months, was the accumulation of boats, trailers, tractor trailers, and heavy-load equipment on hotel properties. The ordinance limits storage of such items to no more than 24 hours, thereby making the exterior not only more aesthetically pleasing, but also making signage and the property more visible from the highway frontage.

The ordinance addresses many safety issues, such as the location, number, and type of fire extinguishers, and even the storage of outdoor grills and other cooking appliances. The structural integrity of balconies and landings is evaluated to ensure adequate support in these areas. The changing of air filters is monitored, and adequate operation of exhaust fans is verified. Current state boiler and elevator inspection certificates are required, as well as certification of annual fire alarm and sprinkler testing.

A scoring system was devised, allocating a greater number of points to life-safety items. Individual rooms may be "closed" if they obtain a room score of less than 70 percent, or due to immediately dangerous situations, or as determined necessary by the inspector. A Certificate of Occupancy may be revoked due to an overall inadequate property inspection score, and there is an appeals process.

So what is this costing the hotelier? The current annual hotel fees are \$50, plus \$11 per room. In addition, in an effort to encourage first-time compliance, a significant trip charge and per-room re-inspection fee is charged in cases where a room or property has "failed" and re-inspection is required.

The main expense for the city is that of labor. There are very few fancy tools required in implementation of an ordinance such as this, but the field time required in enforcement is significant and should not be underestimated.

Overall, the Hotel Permit requirement and clearly defined minimum standards have accomplished more than simply "cleaning up" the hotels. Owners and managers appear to be more vested in their properties' appearance and maintenance, and they are taking pride in their establishments. The city, convention and visitor bureau, and chamber of commerce have reported no code enforcement complaints regarding hotel properties since the ordinance has been in place. The initial apparent success of this ordinance has proven to be a "win-win" for the city and hotels; a successful repair of this "weak link." The goal is now to maintain the high standards and, hopefully, reap the benefits for years to come! ★



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