

Incomplete construction leaves students homeless for first week of school

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Students who leased an apartment at Icon 330 found themselves homeless for the first week of school. In an email sent out the week before the move-in date, Icon notified its residents that the building was uninhabitable. Icon notified its tenants that they would not be able to move in following the City of Waterloo's decision not to grant occupancy permits to the building.

Imprint spoke to Waterloo city councillor Jeff Henry, who stated that on inspections held Sept. 3 and 5, Icon 330 did not meet the minimum provincial regulations necessary to receive occupancy permits. He added that, on those dates, the building "still functioned as a construction site."

To some students, Icon's failure to meet the move-in date was a foregone conclusion, with posts on the university subreddit being made months in advance speculating that the building would fail to be completed or sharing rumours they had heard from construction staff.

Students experienced similar difficulties two years ago when Schembri's One Columbia building was still under construction when classes began in September and occupants were left homeless for over a month. According to Sarah Wiley, Feds vice-president of education, these incidents are part of a larger trend.

"This is not only just happening with Schembri and Icon ... it's been happening every year for the past two years, not only to students who are moving into big luxury high-rises, but also to one-off students who are moving into basement apartments that aren't ready on time. It's definitely a systemic issue because of lack of protections from the provincial government in the Residential

Tenancies Act," Wiley said.

The Federation of Students began lobbying for improved protection of tenants in the Residential Tenancies Act in August and has earned the support of the City of Waterloo as well as Kitchener-Waterloo MPP Catherine Fife. As the act currently stands, tenants have very little protection given to them for matters that occur before they occupy their homes, which has resulted in many students being left with little options when they find that their homes aren't ready when they want to move in. Feds is pushing for an increase in pre-occupancy tenant rights as well as giving the Landlord and Tenants Board more power so it can better handle these situations.

In the meantime, Wiley urged students with tenancy issues to make use of on-campus resources like the Off-Campus Housing office or even contacting her directly, as well as speaking to Waterloo Region Community Legal Services, which offers free legal advice in these situations.

Another UW group heavily involved in issues of tenant displacement is the Waterloo Public Interest Research Group (WPIRG). It was instrumental in organizing and empowering students during the One Columbia incident, ultimately helping students get returns on their deposits and terminate their leases. *Imprint* spoke to Alex Diceanu, WPIRG projects and organizational development co-ordinator, who shared Wiley's concerns of there being a larger issue with Waterloo landlords.

"I think these things are going to keep happening, and they're not only just these buildings not being done, but landlord abuse of student tenants is systematic.... The abuses are systematic and they're ongoing, and it doesn't matter if it's a new building or an older building, and these things are going to keep going unless



Icon 330 was supposed to be ready for a Sept. 1 move-in. This is a photo of the building taken in May.

students get organized," Diceanu said.

While the building continues construction, Icon has arranged sleeping arrangements for its residents, but this hasn't mitigated the frustration for some.

"I have been jumping to different hotels in Kitchener, Waterloo, and Cambridge due to ICON's poor management and inability to fulfill deadlines. Currently, they placed me in a two-star hotel in Cambridge until the 24th, which is unfortunate because the rooms are very low quality, and not [to] mention, it's in another city," said Hanson Chen, first-year student and Icon tenant. "Being in this situation makes it very difficult to focus on school because I have to constantly worry about where I'm going to live, where I'll be eating,

where I'll be storing my things, where I'll be washing my clothes, etc."

Henry said that on another inspection held Sept. 9, the north building of Icon 330 met provincial standards and was granted an occupancy permit. At the time of publishing, most of Icon's rooms have been approved by the city, though certain suites on each floor of the south building are still uninhabitable, as well as most of the suites in the podium.

Diceanu warned that even as tenants move in to Icon, they may experience difficulties.

"For students who are staying ... those students are likely going to have ongoing issues even after they move in. Most likely, the amenities in the lease won't all be ready, there's ongoing construc-

tion and things probably won't work properly: there will be issues with water, hydro, those kinds of things that always happen with any new building, especially a rapidly-constructed one — as well as possibly bogus deposits and charges. We'll have to wait and see, but those are things that students have a high chance of encountering if they stick around with Icon. For those students, we would be happy to help them form a tenant association.

"We need students to form tenant associations, almost like a student union for tenants," Diceanu added. "I think that's the only thing in the long run that's going to put pressure on landlords sufficiently to address some of these issues."

Imprint contacted Icon, but they were unavailable to comment.