

Business

New law affects shoplifting costs

From Associated Press reports

GREENSBORO — Only five of North Carolina's major retailers are using a new state law that allows them to demand costs and damages from shoplifters, the president of a retail organization says.

"Generally, I don't think the retailers across the state are that familiar with the law," said Morris McKnight of Charlotte, whose N.C. Retail Loss Prevention Association lobbied for the statute.

Under the law, which took effect in October, store managers can apprehend shoplifters, verify their names and addresses and demand

that they pay a sum of money, including the cost of any merchandise that has been lost or destroyed and damages beyond that.

If the offender refuses to pay, the store files suit in small claims court.

About 40 percent of the shoplifters begged for civil damages have been paying without court action, said McKnight.

The new law allows a merchant to collect up to \$1,000 in each instance. The average retailer demands \$150 to \$300, McKnight said.

"It stemmed basically from the fact that North Carolina retailers last year lost \$500 million," he said. "The

merchants and the consumers have been the ones to pay the cost of this."

The money collected is still only a fraction of the amount lost.

McKnight estimated if a company loses \$1 million from shoplifting in a year, it could expect to recover about \$4,000 to \$5,000 — depending, for example, on how much is collected from each offender and how many offenders are caught.

Some stores are using restitution as an alternative to criminal action; more are taking criminal and civil action simultaneously.

"It's a very reasonable approach to a very serious problem," Mike Zagorac, vice president for public affairs for Eckerd Drugs, told the Greensboro News & Record.

Eckerd is one of the chains, along with Lowe's Foods and Harris Teeter, that is using the new law.

Eckerd managers, for example, try to discern which shoplifters are professional criminals and which have stolen on impulse for the first time, Zagorac said. The store uses the civil route for first-time shoplifters in lieu of criminal prosecution.

Because the financial returns are so small, retailers who use restitution say one of its biggest benefits may be reducing the load on the criminal justice system.

Zagorac said, "Overall, it's been pretty well-received by law enforcement officials and the local district attorneys."

New trends reflect keeping the house instead of moving

From Associated Press reports

NEW YORK — During the 1960s, it was common for young couples to buy a relatively low-priced "first house," which was a subtle way of letting you know they really aspired to much better things.

A few years later, having acquired some equity, they moved to a more commodious dwelling in what they considered a better neighborhood, one that they felt was more in keeping with their view of themselves.

While the motive was snobbish, the results often were quite practical. The better house in a better neighborhood might rise sharply in value, as many of them did during the inflated 1970s. Smart move.

Now something quite different is taking place. Rather than moving, many young couples are staying put, fixing up the old house to suit their needs, and in the process saving themselves a lot of headaches and dollars.

Look around the old neighborhood and you'll see the evidence: new rooms, decks, energy-efficient doors and windows, swimming pools. In some instances small houses are almost encased by additions twice the size.

And once again, the reasons for so doing make sense.

Two big factors are at work: ■ 1. Many families prefer to stay put for financial and socio-cultural reasons.

By remaining, they save various closing costs, taxes, legal fees, moving expenses and the like. They are able to retain ties to

churches, schools and other organizations. And the home might be more convenient to their work.

■ 2. A percentage of families that once might have sought new homes in new developments, as in the 1960s, might be more inclined now to move into homes in existing neighborhoods, fixing up to meet their specific needs.

Influencing such behavior might be the surge in new-home prices, contrasted with bargain prices that sometimes can be found for fix-up houses in older but still desirable neighborhoods.

Whatever the reasons, expenditures for residential remodeling in the past three years have exceeded \$270 billion, and about \$200 billion is expected to be added to that total by the end of 1989.

Last year, according to a preliminary estimate by the Census Bureau, \$94.1 billion was spent on alterations and repairs.

Martin Azola, chairman of the National Association of Realtors' remodeling council, believes the pace will quicken to \$98 billion this year and to more than \$100 billion in 1989.

Of 77 million people born during the post-World War II baby boom, about half own their homes, Azola says. He observes that while many have been trading up, "others are staying put and upgrading."

The upgrading trend doesn't seem to be a reflection of a tougher housing market, as some market analysts contend. It appears not to be solely, if at all, a consequence of couples being unable to make any other choice.



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