

North Carolina Department of Insurance agrees to let students move-in following fire safety concerns

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The first week of fall classes at UNC Asheville always brings a feeling of excitement and anticipation to new and returning UNCA students.

Two weeks ago many of those students were anticipating being some of the first students to move into the The Woods; our new apartment style dorms at UNCA.

Consuelo Perez, a sophomore mechatronics engineering student at UNCA, arrived for the new school year in anticipation of being one of those students.

Perez didn't begin to move into her new dorm until a day later, after multiple negotiations between UNCA and other state agencies took place over whether the buildings at The Woods were safe which ultimately led to a compromise.

UNCA worked toward a solution as students were on standby for nearly two days, some of them having to stay in off site hotel rooms.

"I came a day early and they didn't really have anything planned. I was just told to put my stuff into storage,

and hang around campus and chill," Perez said. "We came to a meeting and they still didn't have a verdict, but I decided to go to the hotel rooms they were offering us and after thirty minutes of me already being there they said we could then move in."

Most of the concerns from the North Carolina Department of Insurance were regarding fire safety.

The State Construction Office had previously awarded the dorms a certificate of occupancy giving UNCA the green light to allow students to move in.

Mike Causey, North Carolina's insurance commissioner and state fire marshal, denied students from moving into The Woods after the certificate was issued, stating that he could not allow student occupancy if there were safety issues regardless of the certificate of occupancy issued.

Asheville Fire Department Chief Scott Burnette in an interview with FOX Carolina highlighted the importance of the stairwells meeting standards in order to withstand fire for a certain period of time.

John Pierce, vice chancellor for administration



A bobcat sits in the middle of the plaza waiting for construction to finish.

and finance at UNCA, took immediate action in helping to negotiate and get a signed agreement with the Department of Insurance three hours after The Woods closed down.

"Once we got a signed copy of the document the next day as quickly as we could we called a meeting to address the items in the agreement with the DOI with the representatives from the State Construction Office, DOI, the Asheville Fire Department, the architect, the contractor and UNC Asheville personnel," Pierce said.

All parties involved in the meeting then met the following day on site to come up with actions, followed by a meeting the next day to

propose solutions.

UNCA officials moved quickly, taking notes in all the meetings circulating them for concurrence with all parties involved.

"We are working very closely with the architect and contractor to make the estimates of cost, timelines and all the things to expediently and safely address the issues involved," Pierce said

Bill Haggard, vice chancellor for student affairs, stated that they had prepared in advance, due to not knowing if The Woods would be finished on time, reserving a block of hotels in the area for student residents moving in early over the weekend.

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