

TENANT NEWS



NEWSLETTER OF THE TENANTS UNION OF VICTORIA AUTUMN 2009

\$6.4 billion dollar boost for public housing



iStockphoto

By Toby Archer, Policy and Media Liaison Worker

In the biggest single expenditure on public housing in a generation, the Rudd Government has introduced a \$6.4 billion social housing fund as part of its Nation Building and Jobs Plan.

The multi-billion dollar windfall is welcomed by housing advocates across the country, including the Tenants Union of Victoria.

The Nation Building and Jobs Plan forms part of the \$42 billion economic stimulus package passed by the Senate on Friday 13 February. Victoria is able to use its share of the funds to fast track the rebuilding of houses and schools lost in the recent bushfires.

After more than a decade of neglect by the previous Commonwealth Government, this is an ambitious program aimed at stimulating the economy and injecting much-needed funds into public housing. Billed as a long term nation building investment, the Commonwealth Treasury estimates that the Nation Building and Jobs Plan will support up to 90,000 jobs in 2008-09 and 2009-10.

what it will buy

Key measures funded in the Nation Building and Jobs Plan include:

- > free ceiling insulation for approximately 2.7 million Australian homes
- > a new building or the upgrading of an existing building in every one of Australia's 9,540 schools

- > the building of more than 20,000 new public and defence homes nationally
- > \$900 one-off cash payments to eligible families, single workers, students, drought effected farmers and others
- > significantly increased funding for local community infrastructure and local road projects

By increasing the supply of public housing, the Rudd Government hopes to halve the number of homeless families and individuals in Australia by 2020. Such significant one-off investment will make a considerable contribution to addressing the drastic shortage of housing and public housing waiting lists. It will enable many households currently experiencing housing stress (ie paying 30 per cent or more of their income on rent) to access secure and affordable housing.

still struggling

Despite the injection of new public housing, many households in the private rental market will continue to struggle with historically low levels of affordability. Victoria is likely to be allocated between 4000 and 5000 new dwellings under the initiative. Currently 37,000 Victorians are on the waiting list for an Office of Housing

property. Nationally, the Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute estimates 442,863 renting households affected by housing stress, with many paying more than 50 per cent of their income on housing. Many live in unsuitable or sub-standard housing or can't live in their area of choice because they can't afford to pay more rent.

At the same time, median real weekly rent across all Australian capital cities has risen from \$164 in March quarter 1995 to \$214 in December quarter 2007, representing a rise of 30 per cent. This means that the cost of rental housing has increased by 30 per cent more than the general cost of living. However, the maximum rates of Commonwealth Rent Assistance remained relatively constant in real terms over the same period.

The Tenants Union of Victoria believes the Commonwealth Government should go even further in reducing housing stress by increasing the maximum Commonwealth Rent Assistance payment. The Victorian Government can also make a significant contribution by banning rental bidding and placing restrictions on the level of rent increases in the Residential Tenancies Act.

For more information contact Toby Archer at the Tenants Union of Victoria on ☎ 9411 1444.

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The Tenants Union would like to thank the people who contributed to this issue.



your guide to abbreviations

Advertisements for rental properties can be very confusing if you are not familiar with the real estate market abbreviations. Here is a list to help you understand what an advertised property actually has to offer.

ac or a/c	Air conditioning	encl	Enclosed	ldr	Lounge dining room	R/O	Room only
amen	Amenities	ens	Ensuite bathroom	ldry	Laundry	ROW	Right of way (laneway)
bds	Bedsitter	Ent	Entrance, entry	liv	Living	s'out	Sleep out
bi	Built-in	estab	Established	lng	Lounge	SB	Solid brick
bics	Built-in cupboards	exc	Excellent	lrg	Large	SC	Self contained
BIR	Built-in robes (wardrobes)	exp	Expenses	LU or lu	Lock up	sec	Secure
br	Bedroom	ext	External	lug	Lock-up garage	semi	Semi-detached
BV	Brick veneer	fam	Family	Lux	Luxury	sep	Separate
Cal Bung	Californian bungalow	F/B	Full board	mod	Modern	SF or sgle fr	Single fronted
cnr	Corner	F tld	Fully tiled	mstr	Master (main)	Sgl	Single
comp	Comprises	feat	Features	neg	Negotiable	shr	Shower
cov	Coverings	fib	Fibro	nr	Near	shwr rcs	Shower recess
cpbds	Cupboards	Fitgs or fits	Fittings	OFp	Open fire place	slug	Single lock-up garage
cple	Couple	flr	Floor	oil htr	Oil heater	spac	Spacious
crpt	Carpet	fl covs	Floor coverings	ONO	Or nearest offer	ss	Stainless steel
d/h	Ducted heating	furn	Furnished	OSP	Off street parking	stry	Storey
d/w	Dishwasher	F/F or f/furn	Fully furnished	orig	Original	tce	Terrace
dbl	Double	gge or grge	Garage	p.c.m	Per calendar month	tubr	Timber
dbl gar	Double garage	ghws	Gas hot water service	pkg or prkg	Parking	t'out	Throughout
dbr	Double bedroom	hse	House	pol flrs	Polished floors	uc or u/c	Under cover
dec	Decorative	htg	Heating	pos	Position	upstrs	Upstairs
dep	Deposit	htr	Heater	pw	Per week	ven blds	Venetian blinds
det	Detached	HWS	Hot water service	qual	Quality	ver	Verandah
DF	Double fronted	HWU	Hot water unit (service)	rc	Reverse cycle	Vic	Victorian
din rm	Dining room	insp	Inspect	rec	Recess	WB	Weather board
dlug	Double lock-up garage	int or intl	Internal	refs	References	W.C	Toilet
drapes	Curtains	k'ette	Kitchenette	rem	Remote control	wi pant	Walk-in pantry
Edw	Edwardian	KIO	Key in office	res	Residence	ww	Wall to wall
elf	Electric light fittings	kit	Kitchen	rf	Roof	wwc	Wall to wall carpet
elhws	Electric hot water service	l'fitt	Light fittings	rms	Rooms	yo	Years old

Additional sources: www.latrobe.edu.au and www.services.unimelb.edu.au

For more information phone the Tenants Union Advice Line on ☎ (03) 9416 2577.

faqs

The Tenants Union's Legal Service answers frequently asked questions (faqs) by tenants in Victoria.

Question: My landlord doesn't mind me having a cat and a dog but I am thinking about moving and I want to bring my pets. What are my rights?

Answer: Often a tenancy agreement (lease) will include a 'no pets' clause and if so, a landlord can refuse to rent you their property if they know that you have a pet. If you can get your new landlord to agree to pets, make sure that the 'no pets' clause is crossed out and that this is initialled by you and the landlord/agent.

Sometimes tenants move into a property without telling the landlord that they have pets. If you do this and the landlord or agent finds out, they may tell you that the pets have to go or you will be evicted. The law is not clear on this. The Tenants Union believes that you cannot be evicted for having a pet unless the landlord can prove that it is causing a nuisance, damaging the property or endangering the safety of neighbours. If your landlord tries to evict you for having pets, contact the Tenants Union immediately.

If you signed a tenancy agreement with a 'no pets' clause, the landlord can apply to the Tribunal for 'breach of agreement'. It will then be up to the Tribunal to decide whether your pet can stay.

For more information contact the Tenants Union Advice Line or see our **Pets** fact sheet.

The above information is of a general nature only. For specific advice about your tenancy problem please phone the Tenants Union Advice Line on ☎ 9416 2577.

Between 1 October and 31 December 2008, there were 46,443 visits to our website.

The top 5 publications to be downloaded were:

- 1 breaking a lease (1991)
- 2 repairs (1179)
- 3 notices to vacate (1164)
- 4 rent increases (1150)
- 5 ending a tenancy (1107)

Visit our website at www.tuv.org.au

the top 5

more work needed to protect renters from climate change

The Tenants Union of Victoria welcomes the Rudd Government's Low Emissions Plan for Renters, but says only mandatory rental housing standards will protect renters from higher energy prices. Low Emissions Plan for Renters rebate will increase from \$500 to \$1000, however participation from landlords remains entirely voluntary.

The Tenants Union believes that only government can ensure that low income renters do not bear an unfair burden of climate change. They can start by instituting minimum standards for rental housing, which includes insulation and the efficiency of water and energy appliances. Minimum standards need to apply to both public and private rental housing.

Unfortunately, most households will miss out due to the plan's reliance on the goodwill of landlords. Ultimately landlords have the right to refuse permission for insulation to be installed. At present, the *Residential Tenancies Act (RTA) 1997* requires a landlord to replace a faulty water or energy fitting with an A-rated appliance, which is a far cry from 5-star efficiency.

The Tenants Union of Victoria wants the Commonwealth Government to consider the following initiatives: work with the states to develop mandatory rental standards including minimum energy and water efficiency standards; establish a national retrofit program; and develop compensation payments for low income households.

tenant tales

the good...

Williamstown and Yarraville real estate agents Compton & Green have introduced an environmentally-friendly 'goes green' program to help landlords and tenants look for ways to save on water and energy in a rental property. For more information contact the agent or visit www.goesgreen.com.au.

the bad...

Sleazy men are taking advantage of the current rental crisis by placing online advertisements offering women free rooms in exchange for sex. The zero-rent ads, targeting women who are desperate for somewhere to live, are becoming increasingly common on popular share house rental websites.

Although there have been numerous complaints about the ads, they do not breach policy guidelines for sites such as www.flatmates.com.au. A statement on the website says that if they were to impose a ban, the ads would merely go underground, making the process unsafe for women.

After receiving complaints, www.flatmates.com.au issued a statement on why it continued to run such ads. 'Sometimes, it's pretty clear it's for sex,' the statement said. 'Our policy is to let them stay, on the basis it's better for these ads to be open and upfront with what they are offering rather than disguise the offer. Take the following ad, currently on www.flatmates.com.au as an example:

'Free rent for girl looking to share bedroom. Tenant must be unencumbered by a boyfriend/partner and willing to participate in a physical relationship. Only genuine offers accepted...'

Source: *The Sunday Telegraph* 15 February 2009, www.flatmates.com

and the ugly!

United States: The ex-husband of one of the nine people killed at a Christmas Eve party has been asked by a landlord to pay the dead woman's rent. Broadcrest Foothill Apartment Homes claims the tenant broke her lease and gave 'insufficient notice to vacate' when she and her 17-year-old son were gunned down by her sister's ex-husband.

The landlord informed the deceased tenant's former husband that he owes \$US2,821 (\$AU4,339) in rent and penalties. The manager of the property refused to comment and messages left at the company's office were not returned.

The tenant, her son and seven others were killed on 24 December by the gunman, who appeared dressed as none other than Santa Claus. He then burned down the house and killed himself.

Source: *Associated Press* 5 February 2009

celebrity tenant



Tim Blackwell, from Launchpad with Tim & Hayley, 7pm weeknights on Radio Nova 100.

How would you describe your place?

It's a very social place... lots of open space, which is great for entertaining. It does get very hot in summer and cold in winter though and the inside temperature doesn't always reflect what's going on outside. This makes it very hard to get dressed in the morning!

Who would you most like to live with and why?

Apart from my beautiful girlfriend of course... I'd always thought Miranda Kerr would be a good flat mate. Not sure why...

What's your most outrageous sharehouse/househunting experience?

When I was living in Sydney, my girlfriend and I rocked up to an open home in Paddington, only to find about 40 other couples had already put in applications!

Finish this sentence: 'My worst experience with a real estate agent is...'

... when they refuse to give you all your bond back because they find spider webs on the balcony. True story!

Many landlords take a DIY approach to repairs. What's the dodgiest repair job you've ever seen?

When I moved into my current place, the power point for the stove and oven was built in behind the wall. Rush job anyone?

What have you got in the fridge?

Lots of food... I just got back from the supermarket.

John Birmingham's housemate died with a falafel in his hand. What will you die with in your hand?

The Foxtel remote.

What do you never leave home without?

Keys are a good start. And at least 3 bucks for a coffee...

Law week 11-17 May

Law Week brings together 200 organisations including law firms, courts and government departments, providing over 250 events across the state.

Highlights of Law Week 2009 include:

- > Courts Open Day with tours and mock trials of the Supreme, County, Magistrates' and Children's Courts
- > Monash Great Law Week Debate
- > Legal information seminars on career paths of women in the law, employment, animal welfare, powers of attorney and wills
- > Cemetery tours visiting the graves of law makers and law breakers!
- > Public library displays with free legal brochures
- > Careers in Law Expo

A full program of Law Week events is available at www.victorialawfoundation.org.au

**Victoria
Law Foundation**
Grants
Publications
Education

11 to 17 May 2009

**Law
Week**

a message for tenants affected by bushfires

In February we experienced some of the worst bushfire conditions in the history of the state. A number of Victorians experienced the loss of family, friends and home. Whilst it's not well known, most of our regional towns have a good proportion of rental housing. We would like to take this opportunity to extend our deep sympathy to all those affected by the bushfires and particularly to any tenants. It's been tough for tenants recently with steep rent increases and very tight vacancy rates. Bushfire has now dramatically added to those problems. We would also like to remind any tenants affected by the fires that they are welcome to contact our advice service if they need advice about their tenancy rights or responsibilities.

With best wishes,

Mark O'Brien

Mark O'Brien
CEO, Tenants Union of Victoria

lights out for earth hour 8.30pm 23 March

Earth Hour is a World Wildlife Fund initiative to take global action against climate change. On Saturday 28 March 2009 people all over the world in cities and towns will turn off their lights for one hour between 8.30-9.30 pm. Earth Hour is an opportunity for all of us to show support and send a powerful global message that it's possible to have a positive effect on climate change.



tenancy tips

tip> If you can't afford to pay the bond on a rental property, you may be able to apply for a bond loan from your local Housing Office. A bond loan is an interest-free loan that can be used to cover the cost of the bond (it cannot be used for rent in advance or for moving costs). The full amount of the loan must be paid back at the end of your tenancy. If your landlord withholds some of the bond because of unpaid rent or damages, you are still required to repay the full amount of the bond loan. The amount you can borrow will depend on factors such as the number of bedrooms in the property you will be renting. For more information visit www.housing.vic.gov.au or your local Housing Office.

tip> If you are 14 days or more behind with the rent, the landlord can give you a 14-day Notice to Vacate. However this doesn't mean that you have to move out of the property if you don't want to. There is a step-by-step process that the landlord has to follow in order to have you evicted. A Notice to Vacate is just the first step before applying to the Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal for permission to have you evicted. It is also important to know that only the police can carry out an eviction, and only after the landlord has followed all the necessary steps. For more information see our fact sheet **Avoiding eviction for rent arrears** or contact the Tenants Union.

tip> The Tenants Union has produced a new fact sheet called **Applying for a private rental property**. It covers house hunting, inspections, applications, tenant databases and more.

tip> The Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal (VCAT) is making special arrangements to fast-track hearings for tenants on bushfire-related tenancy matters such as return of bond. For further information contact the Tenants Union or phone VCAT directly on freecall 1800 001 099. You can also email VCAT at vcat@vcat.vic.gov.au (put the words **Bushfire priority** in the Subject line).

tip> Some tenants affected by bushfire may have difficulty getting their bond back because they have lost records or cannot locate the agent/landlord. If this applies to you, contact the Tenants Union for advice or contact the Residential Tenancies Bond Authority (RTBA), who will help tenants affected by bushfire on a case-by-case basis. Phone 1300 137 164 for the cost of a local call or email rtba@justice.vic.gov.au.

For advice on your tenancy problem, phone our advice line or drop in to the Tenants Union.

drop-in advice hours

	Mon	Tues	Wed	Thurs	Fri
9.00am–4.30pm	✓	✓		✓	✓
1.00pm–8.00pm			✓		

The Tenants Union drop-in advice service is at 55 Johnston Street Fitzroy (Melway ref 2C A7)



the rent report

How prepared are Victorian households for an emergency?

preparation	tenant households	owner-occupiers
emergency plan	11%	15%
fire blanket	13%	22%
fire extinguisher	16%	31%
portable first aid kit	42%	56%
easily accessed emergency phone numbers	62%	70%
smoke alarm (compulsory)	95%	98%

How prepared are Victorian households (all types) prepared for an emergency based on region?

preparation	inner melbourne	outside melbourne
emergency plan	9%	18%
fire blanket	13%	23%
fire extinguisher	15%	32%
first aid qualification	23%	33%
portable first aid kit	36%	60%
easily accessed emergency phone numbers	57%	71%

Source: ABS State and Regional Indicators 1367.2 September Quarter 2008

telephone advice hours

9416 2577

	Mon	Tues	Wed	Thurs	Fri
9.00am–4.00pm	✓	✓		✓	✓
1.00pm–8.00pm			✓		

raise the roof

Raise the roof is the official radio show for residential tenants in Victoria. On the first Wednesday of each month from 6pm–6.30pm, our experts discuss tenancy news, legal issues and policy updates, and bring you special guests and laid-back tunes. Tune in on 1 April, 6 May and 3 June to Radio 3CR (855 AM). To be a guest or give us your feedback phone the Tenants Union on ☎ 9411 1444.



Tenants Union of Victoria membership form

Members receive a free copy of the *Tenant's Handbook* and a subscription to *Tenant News*. This form is for individual tenants only (owners/organisations must contact the Tenants Union for a full membership form).

Name

Postal address

Postcode Phone ()

Membership fees – Please tick the appropriate box. All fees include GST.

Associate membership*

	1 year	3 years
Unwaged	<input type="checkbox"/> \$5	<input type="checkbox"/> \$10
Low wage	<input type="checkbox"/> \$10	<input type="checkbox"/> \$20
Higher wage	<input type="checkbox"/> \$15	<input type="checkbox"/> \$30

*If you want to become a full member, the Tenants Union Board must approve your membership. Associate members receive the same benefits as full members for the same fee but are not entitled to vote at Annual General Meetings.

Signed Date / /

Please return this form with your cheque or money order to Tenants Union of Victoria PO Box 234 Fitzroy 3065

Tenant News mailing list/change of address

You may have received your copy of *Tenant News* after calling our telephone advice line. Please note that callers' details do not go onto the *Tenant News* mailing list so if you would like to receive future issues you will need to sign up.

If you'd like to add your name to the *Tenant News* mailing list, or if you've changed your address, please complete your details and return this form to Tenants Union of Victoria PO Box 234 Fitzroy 3065. You can also phone ☎ 9411 1444, fax 9416 0513 or email us at tenantnews@tuv.org.au

If you'd like to become a Tenants Union member, please return this form together with the membership form on the left.

Name (optional)

Current address Postcode

Previous address (if you have moved) Postcode

Tenant News is available online at
www.tuv.org.au