

Fraternity will soon fill up with lawyers

An environmental law organization will hold its annual meeting in the house

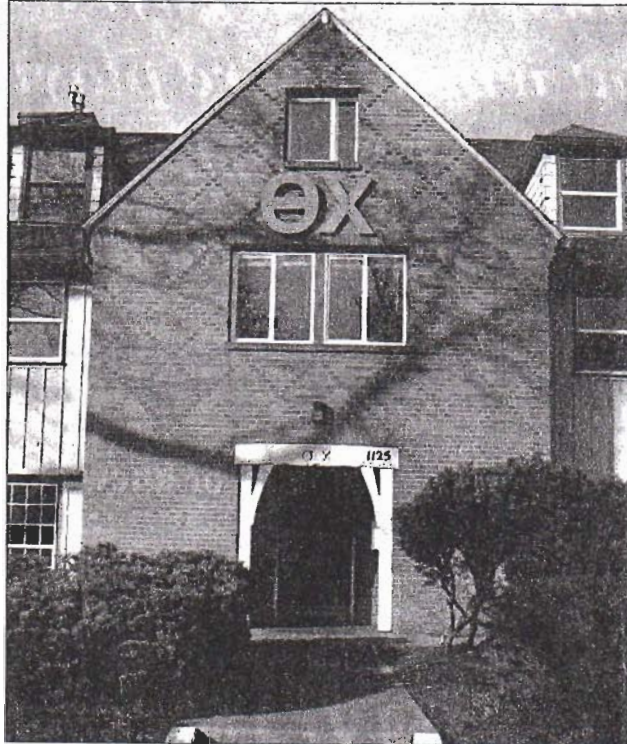
By SUSAN PALMER
The Register-Guard

The Theta Chi fraternity house has sat empty for the past month, after the University of Oregon yanked its affiliation in December and closed the house over a range of conduct problems.

But the place will get lively again come Sunday when 30 environmental lawyers from around the world gather for an annual meeting there.

The lawyers — from as far away as China, Kenya and Ecuador — will attend an event sponsored each year by the Environmental Law Alliance Worldwide, a nonprofit group that functions as an information hub for lawyers in 70 countries. Normally the meeting is held at a hotel in Yachats, said Executive Director Bern Johnson.

But ELAW is feeling the effects of a miserable economy along with everyone else. While individual donors have continued supporting the organization, foundation support has been declining, Johnson said. One foundation, that for the last four years had given ELAW \$70,000, gave nothing this year because its own



CHRIS PIETSCH/The Register-Guard

Former Theta Chi fraternity at 1125 E. 19th Ave., near the University of Oregon campus, is mostly unoccupied these days aside from house director John Hibbs, who lives there. However, the house is available for rent by groups coming to Eugene for meetings or other events.

endowment had declined 40 percent, Johnson said.

Looking for a way to keep costs down, Johnson contacted the fraternity after seeing news reports about its closure.

The thought of renting out the empty house while the fraternity-

works on repairing its relationship with the university sounded good to John Hibbs, the house director who still lives at the spacious structure just east of Potter Street on East 19th Avenue. Hibbs, who is not a member

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of the fraternity, has a contract to live in the house through the end of the school year. The house is owned by local Theta Chi alumni.

"We're delighted to do it," Hibbs said. "There isn't a great deal of payment, but in an empty house, we'll take the revenues wherever we can find them."

Johnson declined to say exactly what he's paying, but confirmed that he's saving about two-thirds of his housing costs for the meeting.

Among the lawyers who'll be attending is Pablo Fajardo Mendoza, whose work to protect the Ecuadorian Amazon from oil pollution has been featured in Vanity Fair magazine and in national newspapers such as the Los Angeles Times. Fajardo Mendoza won the Goldman Prize, the world's largest prize honoring grass-roots environmental efforts.

He'll also be a keynote speaker at the UO's annual Public Interest Environmental Law Conference, which begins Feb. 26.

ELAW helps far-flung envi-

ronmental lawyers share ideas, science and strategies as they work to protect the environment. Most of the work happens via the Internet, through e-mails and phone calls, Johnson said.

Those electronic tools can be highly cost-effective, but sometimes people need to meet face to face, he said.

"It helps build the relationships that make collaborating long-distance much easier," he said.

The lawyers' coming visit isn't the first time Theta Chi has hosted visitors. During last

year's Olympic Track & Field Trials, venue caterers stayed at the house, Hibbs said.

Because the fraternity had already purchased beds and bedding to accommodate the caterers, they have the gear to provide for the lawyers, Hibbs said.

Once the lawyers are gone, the house will be available to others who might want to rent the space in coming months. Hibbs said.

Those who are interested can call him at 343-9389 or e-mail him at hibbs@oregon-sigs.org.