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3 years after getting notices, 243 illegal Coimbatore buildings still in use

COIMBATORE: Three years after they were sent notices for not having mandatory approval documents, 243 illegal buildings in the city continue to be in use and no action has been taken by the local planning authority.

In February 2011, the local planning authority (LPA) identified 177 educational institutions and 107 residential and commercial buildings in the city that were constructed without mandatory building approval documents. The list includes hospitals, banks, industries, colleges and schools. Many well-known residential complexes in the city remain unapproved, said a senior LPA official. The building owners neither responded to the notices nor did LPA officials take further action. Buildings over 4000 sq ft within the city limits have to get approval from LPA.

LPA is in the midst of a drive to identify buildings with deviations from the approved plan and will be issuing notices to 47 gated communities and group development projects in the city within a week. The drive comes in the wake of building

collapse in Chennai in June in which 61 workers died.

LPA authorities said most plans they receive are rejected. "Of the 30 to 40 plans that reach us every month, only five or six get approval, but many builders go ahead with the projects, paying scant regard to LPA rules and approval," said an official. Every inspection reveals at least five unapproved buildings, the source added.

Of the showcause notices issued to 284 buildings in 2011, 27 buildings owners applied for approval and 15 had submitted building proposals. Eight buildings were constructed on agricultural land without getting land conversion documents from district collector and directorate of town and country planning (DTCP). According to a government order in January 2011, the district collector has to visit the spot and submit a report to the DTCP office, which takes a decision.

The primary defaulters were found to be educational institutions, which usually do not pay the one-time infrastructure and amenities fee that is fixed at Rs 285 a sqm. "Since most college campuses are over 1 lakh sq ft, the fee is quite high and they do not pay it and get approval," said an official. The colleges apply to All India Council for Technical Education or Medical Council of India for conditional operation, stating they would get building approval soon.

DTCP officials said strict action is not taken against colleges as students' education is at stake. "If we seal colleges, where will the students go?" said the official.

LPA officials say they have not taken action because they do not have enough staff. "For such a big city, we have only 24 staff in the office. There is no separate eviction or inspection wing. We do as much we can," said C Mathivanan, member secretary, LPA, Coimbatore. "People should check the documents thoroughly before buying property."

Builders suggested computerization of the process. "LPA should approve building plans online to reduce delays and make the system transparent," said a builder.