

Oh rats! Storage facility sets up defense after locker raided by rats

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When Summerville resident Allen Morris opened up his climate-controlled storage unit over Memorial Day weekend, the sight inside shocked him.



His first words?: "Uh-oh."

Wooden furniture, canvas pictures, blankets and other belongings were covered in rat feces; he said he also spotted two rodent carcasses.

Morris shook his head in dismay as he recounted that moment. He said in the first several months after he rented the unit at Extra Space Storage on Trolley Road—about 14 months ago—he would stop by and check on it every two to three weeks. He said he needed a place to store belongings while having his new home built.

Over time Morris dropped by the business every five to six weeks.

"I saw that everything seemed to be OK (so) I didn't go as much," he said.

Because it was a holiday weekend when Morris discovered the damage, he said he waited a few days to address the issue with a site supervisor, who simply told him to file his losses with insurance and handed him a customer protection plan pamphlet.

"That led me to believe that we had coverage," Morris said.

But he later learned his insurance covered everything from flooding to theft – but not rodents.

“I’m like, ‘Well, why do we carry insurance?’” Morris said.

He also wanted to know why he wasn’t notified about the issue, which could have prevented him from losing between \$3,500 and \$4,000 worth of items, when he said a site supervisor even admitted to a rat problem there.

"She said that they had been dealing with the rat issue for a while now and implied that the rat traps had been there since before we moved our belongings in," Morris said.

But never once during his frequent visits to the site did he spot any traps, which he said now litter the property.

“They must have 100 out there...not exaggerating,” Morris said.

Among his damaged items were a mattress and box spring, china cabinet, special hat souvenirs he had purchased on a trip to Mexico and a beautiful wooden shelf Morris said an elderly man had hand-carved for him.

“We threw a lot of stuff away,” Morris said. “But how do you put a price tag on stuff you didn’t pay for (that) people’s given you.”

Morris said a silver lining was that he salvaged some non-chewed belongings, including a sentimental one: his deceased father’s favorite recliner. But even those items he saved required extensive cleaning since they were dirtied with feces.

Business policy

Looking for answers, the Journal Scene visited Extra Space Storage, where an on-site manager said company policy doesn’t allow employees to talk to media. The Journal Scene then contacted the headquarters for Extra Space Storage, located in Utah.

Spokesperson Jeff Norman, vice president of investor relations and corporate communications, confirmed the policy and said no complaints had reached his office regarding the Summerville location.

But Norman also didn’t deny that rats sometimes find their way into the storage units.

“Unfortunately, from time-to-time we will experience a problem in a unit with rodents, typically if somebody is storing food in their unit,” he said.

But Morris said he never stored food in his unit.

Norman said whether individual sites notify tenants about an infestation “depends on the extent of the concern.”

“If we have a concern with a specific unit or a group of units, we would likely not notify all tenants, since it is impacting a small area. In these cases, we would just work with a pest control vendor to resolve the problem,” Norman said.

Norman offered a past example in which his office had received word of multiple incidents at a specific Extra Space property, and in that incident tenants were notified of the issue and told to vacate units to avoid additional damage and root out the pest.

As for insurance, Norman said the insurance the business offers doesn't currently cover rodent damage, though it's an option company officials are considering adding.

"Because we recognize that this is a concern for customers, we started discussions several months ago with our insurance provider to see if it would be possible to add pest/rodent coverage to the current insurance product, and (we) continue to explore that possibility," Norman said.

Who inspects?

The Department of Health and Environmental Control conducts business inspections but only when it comes to health care facilities and restaurants, according to an agency spokesperson in the Columbia office.

And according to Rich Palmer, Summerville’s chief of building and codes enforcement, it’s also not the duty of his office. Palmer said his department investigates a business where any alteration or repair requiring permits is conducted, or if there is a complaint about a business possibly violating property maintenance or a town ordinance.

Palmer said the building department checks on new businesses before their openings but that it’s the town fire marshal’s office that at least once a year inspects all businesses and schools in the town’s jurisdiction.

According to Fire Marshal Ben Bunting, Extra Space Storage is one business his office inspects annually, while some others in town receive inspections every six months. However, Bunting said his office doesn’t look for rodents and other critter infestations, and doesn’t have the authority to enter actual storage units.

“That’s an issue of Fourth Amendment rights,” he said, referring to the U.S. Constitution, which protects citizens from "unreasonable searches and seizures."

Bunting’s office primarily ensures businesses have exit signs properly placed, aisles unblocked and fire extinguishers available.

While Palmer's office doesn't conduct routine business inspections, he said the town did adopt an International Property Maintenance Code in 2015 that "does address rodent infestation."

"If we received a complaint about rodent infestation at a particular location, we would investigate the complaint and work with the owner to have the issue resolved," Palmer said.

He said he has not received any complaints about Extra Space Storage.

How others prevent pests

Just yards away from Extra Space Storage is Warehouse Specialties Self-Storage, where Manager Lisa Hendren said rats in particular have never been an issue at the business; at least, she said, she's never heard a customer complaint about rats.

Hendren did say the business conducts routine pest control depending on the season and type of pest. Winter is more rat season according to Hendren. Similar to what she does to safeguard against rats at her home, the business puts out poison, she said, though in empty units only since employees aren't allowed inside rented units where customers have belongings stored. And so far the precautionary measure has worked.

"I have found that's where they are attracted to," Hendren said of empty units.

She also advises against storing food in units and is not surprised people have seen them in other storage facilities in town.

"They're everywhere," Hendren said.

At Greenwave Self-Storage on Orangeburg Road, Manager Robin Whitmire laughed when she explained the possible reason behind the property's limited number of rats, mice and other varmint the last 5.5 years she's worked there. Whitmire said a snake that employees named "Charlie" lived in the bushes until recently.

Greenwave has both standard and climate-controlled units but Whitmire said as far as she knows rodents have never found their way inside a climate-controlled one. The standard units she likened to a non-airtight garage with cracks and other small openings which a bug or other critter could sneak through.

In addition to having a landscaper spray and put out poison to keep pests away, Whitmire said the business also contracts with an entomologist who visits the site twice a year, in the spring and fall.

"You have to stay on top of any vermin that you're trying to eradicate," she said.

A regional, state nuisance

According to wildlife extraction expert Eric “Critter” McCool, known throughout the Lowcountry and nation for his pest control and bee extractions, rats are common to the Palmetto State since warm temperatures provoke the rodent to continuously forage and mate.

“South Carolina in particular already has a pretty severe issue with rodents,” McCool said. “They pretty much constantly eat and use the restroom.”

In fact in the Charleston region, rodents are the top “nuisance problem species...second to termites,” McCool said.

He explained storage units are common hideaways for rats because they offer ample “nesting material” like clothing and furniture and if food is nearby, it’s guaranteed they will find it.

“As long as there is a food source within a couple hundred yards, or feet, away,” McCool said.

The rodent in the wild is also a health hazard since it can carry up to 5 million types of viruses on one single hair, McCool said. The life expectancy for a rat is between five months and a year.