

Commissioner moves to revoke apartment license

By Jamie Smith Hopkins, *The Baltimore Sun*, August 16, 2010

Baltimore officials are trying to revoke the license of an apartment landlord in the city's Reservoir Hill neighborhood and move residents out of the 202 units, a rare step aimed at stamping out drug activity and violence.

Baltimore Housing Commissioner Paul T. Graziano said he issued a notice late Monday of his intent to revoke the license of the Madison Park North Apartments in the 700 block of W. North Ave. A hearing is scheduled for September to determine the fate of the property and its residents, many of whom would be relocated with government assistance if the license is pulled.

Graziano said police have "literally been called to the site hundreds of times" in the past two years for drug dealing, violence and complaints of intimidation. Two people were killed there in the past six weeks, he said. Apartment owners must act when renters commit crimes, he added.

"It was very clear that the case warranted this extreme action," he said. "It's extremely rare, but I want to put owners on notice that we will use it whenever we believe that the owners' performance has been so egregiously irresponsible that it puts residents of both the housing and the surrounding community at serious risk."

Neighbors call the complex "murder mall," said Sandra Matthews, who lives nearby. "It's terrible," she said, listing off incidents in the area: robbery, fights, killing. "You've got to go there in the daytime."

An official with Tricap Management Inc., a Los Angeles firm that owns the complex, said she had received no word of the city's intent to revoke the license. She said she didn't understand why officials would seek to do so, calling the complex "quiet." She said the company has a security detail working there.

"We've had passing scores on all our inspections, and I'm concerned that this is something we don't know about," said Shelby Kaplan, Tricap's president. "We have enjoyed long periods of time with no violence, and every now and then, as every property does, we do have some violence. ... We don't believe that we have more than our share."

The complex is fully leased, she said. The city describes the property as 44 buildings spread across more than 8 acres. Tricap receives federal housing subsidies from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development to cover residents' rents.

Most Madison Park North residents are law-abiding, but a few are terrorizing everyone else in the complex and causing problems in the surrounding community, Graziano said. If the complex is shut down, the city and federal government would help relocate renters without criminal records, he said.

Tyrone Harding, an 18-year-old who has lived in the complex for most of his life, said the security there is reckless. He recounted a recent incident in which he said he was sitting on his stoop one night and a security guard pulled a gun on him and forced him to lie down on the ground.

But neighbor Larian Finney, who moved near the complex seven years ago, said it has "calmed down a lot since then." He said the company that provides security does a good job keeping the perimeter of the complex quiet.

The city's housing agency last revoked an apartment license in 2005, also because of drug activity and violence. The owner of the Pall Mall Apartments in Northwest Baltimore was unable to rent it out as a result and lost the building to foreclosure. The city purchased the 31-unit complex in 2007 and razed it the next year.

City officials, including Mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake and City Council President Bernard C. "Jack" Young, plan to gather at the Madison Park North complex Tuesday to officially announce the housing agency's efforts to shut it down.

"He's been hearing about this area for years now," said Lester Davis, a spokesman for Young.

Graziano said his agency sent a letter detailing "our extreme concern about the conditions in that development" to the apartment owner in October 2008. Housing officials talked with Kaplan as well, he said, but she did not address the problem "in any serious way."

Reservoir Hill community leaders repeatedly begged city officials for help, Graziano said. After a teenager was shot there in July, Councilman William H. Cole IV set up a meeting between police and the housing agency to see what legal actions they could pursue, Graziano said.

Police can order a building padlocked to deter crime, a step they have occasionally taken, he said. But officials decided to try to revoke the license in this case.

The housing agency's intent-to-revoke notice to Tricap Management is a 15-page document detailing a laundry list of crimes that have occurred there, including the two recent homicides and a reported assault on a 53-year-old resident who was hit in the head with a handgun while sitting outside her building.

"We will not tolerate criminal activity in our neighborhoods," Rawlings-Blake said in a statement. "We will use any and all enforcement tools against irresponsible landlords who threaten the health, safety, or general welfare of their residents or the general public."

HUD, the federal agency that issues rent subsidies to the property, told the city that it would work with local officials to relocate residents if the license is pulled, Graziano said. The federal agency would issue housing vouchers the renters can take elsewhere.

But no one with a criminal background would get that relocation aid, Graziano declared.