

Closing Madison Park North

Editorial, *Baltimore Sun*, October 3, 2010

The buildings that compose the troubled Madison Park North complex on North Avenue in Reservoir Hill do not look foreboding. They are three-story structures, three- and four-bedroom apartments with courtyards, a squarish style of housing sometimes seen in the suburbs. Yet, according to Baltimore police, city officials and residents, it is a dangerous place that needs to be closed.

There have been two homicides and three shootings there this year. It has been dubbed the "murder mall" by neighbors. The Central Police District commander, Major Dennis Smith, said his officers are constantly being summoned to the complex, which contains about 200 units scattered among 44 buildings. Three different drug rings, according to Major Smith, have operated on the premises. Even walking near the complex can be dangerous. One Reservoir Hill mother told *The Sun's* Julie Scharper that her son and daughter had been attacked when they walked past the complex, and she now drives her teenage children even if they're only going a few blocks, to ensure their safety.

Mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake, Housing Commissioner Paul T. Graziano and City Councilman William Cole IV blame the landlord, Los Angeles-based TriCap Management, for deteriorating conditions and rampant crime at the complex. A hearing to revoke TriCap's multi-family dwelling license, a move that would likely end federal subsidies to the complex, was held last month. A decision on revoking the license is expected next week. Revoking the license could close the complex but also would force many of the 700-plus residents to find other sites offering subsidized housing.

Councilman Cole, who represents the area, and a coalition of Reservoir Hill neighborhood associations contest claims made by TriCap owner Shelby Jean Kaplan that the troubles at Madison Park North are recent and surprising. Councilman Cole said that over the years, he and other city officials have repeatedly notified the owner of problems at the complex ranging from overflowing dumpsters to security issues. The neighborhood associations say they, too, have reached out to the owner and found her callous. The time has come, they say, to protect the residents of the complex and the greater community from what has become a haven for crime.

One clear lesson from Madison Park North is that if a large housing complex is managed by an unresponsive landlord, there will probably be big trouble.

Another is that the old model of public housing — putting large numbers of low- or no-income residents into high-density settings — has to change. Baltimore made headlines years ago by demolishing all of its high-rise public housing, but it turns out that low-rises aren't necessarily any different. A better model is mixed-income housing, like the homes and apartments at the Heritage Crossing complex just west of Martin Luther King Boulevard.

Where the towers of the George P. Murphy Homes once stood, now there is an attractive mix of low-rise residences, some occupied by homeowners, some by renters. Some are former residents of the Murphy Homes.

The Reservoir Hill Improvement Council thinks that putting a well-run, mixed-income housing complex on the Madison Park North site would be a welcome change from the chaos and crime that exists there now. In the long run, that would be ideal, but such a solution faces many obstacles, not the least of which being that TriCap will still own the property — and longstanding rumors that it would sell remain just rumors.

Councilman Cole has pledged to ensure that any displaced Madison Park North tenants who pass a criminal background check would not only get a voucher entitling them to similar housing but would also be given relocation expenses. He argues, rightly, that it is unfair to punish the law-abiding residents of the complex for the mismanagement of the owner or the criminal behavior of other residents or visitors. But even that solution could be less than ideal if it forces the tenants to move to an unfamiliar community and away from the support structures they've built up — church, schools, and so on.

But the nearby neighborhood associations have taken the extra step of saying they welcome tenants who want to remain in the area and have issued a statement urging city officials to help the displaced find housing in Reservoir Hill. This is commendable. They could easily have simply demanded the complex be closed but instead are working to be part of the solution. That may be the bright spot in the saga of Madison Park North.