

'The ugly just won't go away' at Madison Park North Apartments

By Julie Scharper, *The Baltimore Sun*, August 17, 2010

Anita Shelton has presided over the squat brown brick building just off North Avenue for nearly all of the past four decades.

Children troop in her door — she keeps it open all day long — for bandages and Popsicles. Their mothers stop by to seek advice from the woman they call "Miss 'Nita," one of the last original tenants of the publicly funded complex.

But despite her years at the Madison Park North Apartments, Shelton welcomes an effort by city officials to revoke the landlord's license — a move that will likely leave Shelton and her neighbors scrambling to find new homes.

"I've seen the good. I've seen the bad. And now the ugly is here, and the ugly just won't go away," the 63-year-old mother of five said Tuesday.

Shelton watched from the faded lawn of the Reservoir Hill complex Tuesday afternoon as Mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake, Housing Commissioner Paul T. Graziano and others — standing on the other side of a tall metal fence — denounced the building's owners and said the best solution for rampant crime was to move residents out.

"Madison Park North has been a haven for drugs and drug violence for far too long," Rawlings-Blake said. "We will not tolerate irresponsible landlords preying on our communities and making residents prisoners in their own homes."

Graziano issued a notice Monday of his intent to revoke the building's multi-family dwelling license. The department has scheduled a hearing for September to determine whether the property's owner, Los Angeles-based Tricap Management Inc., and managers failed to prevent drug trafficking and nuisance crimes.

If the license is revoked, the federal government will likely cut all subsidies to the building and issue vouchers to residents. City housing officials have pledged to help residents move into safer housing.

"We're here today to take an action we don't take lightly," Graziano said. "But less moderate approaches are not working. ... This is not the kind of place we want to see in our city. This is not the kind of place we can tolerate."

The 8-acre property, which comprises 44 buildings, has seen two murders in recent weeks: a shooting in early July and a stabbing earlier this month. Police have been called to the address more than 250 times over the past three months — primarily, police spokesman Anthony Guglielmi said, for reports of violent crimes.

"You shouldn't have to live like this with this level of violence," Councilman William H. Cole IV, told residents and neighbors who gathered for the afternoon news conference.

William Blackford, an attorney who has represented Tricap in the past, said the apartment owner beefed up security, added more lighting and presented a safety plan to the city after the housing agency complained about crime in October 2008.

Blackford said the city never responded to his correspondence about the plan. He was critical of the notice of intent, which Graziano issued less than a month from the Sept. 9 hearing date.

"This company has worked and spent a lot of money addressing the city's concerns in the past," said Blackford, an attorney with the law firm of Blackford & Flohr in Severna Park. "But they do so in a cooperative spirit. So we find the timing and substance of the allegations of the city very concerning."

Closing down Madison Park North Apartments would displace hundreds of people, he added. As the officials spoke Tuesday, a half-dozen children clung to the bars of the fence that marks the boundaries of the complex. They sucked on blue freezer pops, swapped bright plastic bracelets and stared with wide eyes as officials discussed the crime in their neighborhood.

Ciera Witherspoon, 27, said it's a struggle to raise her seven children, who range in age from four months to nine years, surrounded by drug activity and violent crime. "My kids don't go out. They can't walk to the store," she said, standing in the living room of her three-bedroom apartment. During the summer, she shepherds her children on short outings or parks them in front of the television.

"I'm ready to go," said Witherspoon, who is taking classes to become a medical assistant. "My son is almost 10. I don't want him to grow up thinking he needs to sell drugs."

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Witherspoon said housing officials assigned her to live in Madison Park North five years ago. She said she has tried and failed to move to other housing.

Her friend and neighbor Crystal Jackson, 30, agrees that the complex has serious problems, but is panicked at the thought of having to find new housing.

"Winter is right around the corner," she said. "What are we supposed to do with our children? No one wants to stay here and settle for the rest of your life. But let me try to pull myself together before you throw us out."

Private developers built the complex with federal subsidies in the early 1970s on a strip that once housed small shops. Officials touted it as a mixed-use project that included a

school and a retail space as well as homes for both low- and moderate-income families, according to Baltimore Sun articles from the era.

The school closed long ago, and only a few shops, screened by dingy metal grates, remain in the area residents have dubbed "Murder Mall."

Roscoe Herring, an 80-year-old community activist who lives a few blocks away in the 2100 block of Park Avenue, advocated for the development when it was built. He fears that newer residents of Reservoir Hill are trying to push residents who are poor or black out of the neighborhood. "You don't move a whole block of people out just because there are a few bad apples," said Herring. "I think that people are going to fight back, and I wouldn't fault them."

Herring said he was one of the first African-Americans to move into the neighborhood in the 1960s, back when many Jewish doctors, merchants and lawyers lived there. In time, the neighborhood came to be home to many African-American luminaries, including the Rev. Marion Bascom, who lives a few doors from Herring.

But drug dealers infiltrated the neighborhood in the 1980s, bringing violence and decay to the streets of grand brownstones. A row of businesses on Whitelock Street that persistently drew drug crime was demolished, and now a tangled community garden flourishes on the lot.

Shelton, one of the first residents of Madison Park North, remembers an idyllic community where children would play on jungle gyms while parents chatted on benches.

Now, the stairwells are dark and dingy; residents say maintenance problems are not resolved quickly. Cigarette packs and soda bottles lie scattered on the sidewalks, and rust stains the window casings.

Shelton has made many improvements to her apartment, painting swirls of stucco on the walls, laying ruby-colored carpet on the living room floor and hanging Art Deco mirrors and photographs of her children and grandchildren.

She says that she's come to an uneasy truce with the drug dealers that surround the building. "I've gotten over the fear. Everyone knows Miss 'Nita is not in your business," she said. "I think it helps that I take care of the kids."

Over the years, she has grown accustomed to the sound of gunshots. "It's like a regular thing," she said. "It's just normal." She raised five children in the publicly subsidized complex and now watches her grandchildren while their parents work. But she's eager for the voucher that will allow her to move.

"I think it's the best thing they can do," she said. "My kids have all moved out. I'm the only one left."