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Police seek anti-crime registry of landlords

CMPD says property owners must help them enforce the law in high-crime areas – or face charges, loss of income.

By Julia Oliver

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The Charlotte-Mecklenburg Police Department wants all Charlotte landlords to register with the city and be responsible for reducing crime at problem properties.

The department has drafted an ordinance that would track the rental industry and give the police chief the power to stop uncooperative landlords from renting out homes.

The document will be discussed for the first time today by a “stakeholders group” that includes property owners and managers, as well as neighborhood leaders and at least one advocate for the poor. Police officials hope to have the ordinance ready for a City Council vote by early next year.

The ordinance is designed to address what police say is a high rate of crime at rental property. It lays out a process for the department to identify high-crime properties, then work with the owners of those homes to address the problems. If the property owners refuse to take the measures recommended by police – which could range from tenant screening to installing a fence or lighting – they would face sanctions, including being charged with a misdemeanor or ultimately losing the ability to rent their property.

Advocates of the measure include neighborhood leaders who struggle to find absentee landlords when tenants disturb the neighborhood with noise, litter or even shootings. They complain that addresses on property records can be outdated and don't include phone numbers.

“So often these owners are absentee, really absentee,” said Dorothy Waddy, who leads a coalition of 18 neighborhoods along West Boulevard. “They're in California and Washington and Maryland.”

Police have said that Charlotte is seeing a growing number of property crimes in rented single-family homes, a trend that strains city resources. Authorities reported in March that violent crime is almost four times as likely to happen at rental properties than at owner-occupied, single-family homes.

“The police are not property managers,” said Deputy Chief Ken Miller. “But there are a few properties where we come close, because we spend so much time there.”

Landlords bristle at the proposed regulations. They say the Police Department's approach unfairly targets them and will diminish the amount of affordable housing in the city.

Landlords argue that if the Police Department collects their contact information, it should collect that information from all property owners, including businesses and owner-occupied homes.

"I don't think we need an ordinance," said Allon Thompson, president of the Charlotte Landlord Association. "I think we need better enforcement of the laws existing,"

Scott Wilkerson, who oversees about 2,000 Charlotte rental units for Babcock and Brown Residential, suggested that the police register tenants, instead.

"We already have a registration system. It's called the Register of Deeds," he said. He argued that targeting landlords puts too narrow a focus on crime-fighting. "Why not focus on the crime instead of the property type?"

Ted Fillette, lead attorney with Charlotte's Legal Aid office, is also part of the group reviewing the ordinance. He said he is watching out for elements that could unfairly penalize renters. For example, he said, he is leery of stringent screening requirements.

"I just don't know whether there's going to be undue and harsh exclusion of people," he said.

Members of the City Council's public safety committee, which has seen the draft ordinance, said they support the department's efforts. Councilman Warren Turner heads the committee and said he wanted it to be tougher on landlords. Instead of an initial warning, he said, landlords should get a notice saying they would be fined if they didn't correct the problem by a certain date.

"I don't have a lot of tolerance for dealing with people twice," he said. "That's too much staff time, too much work."

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