

Durham announces housing code inspections for rental properties

The city's Department of Neighborhood Improvement Services plans to inspect each of 54,000 rental units

by Norman Gossett

Rick Hester, assistant director and code enforcer with the Durham City Department of Neighborhood Improvement Services, has announced the department's intention to inspect the city's rental properties to ensure compliance with housing rules.

"There are 54,000 rental units in Durham, and we plan to inspect each one to see if it meets the standards for the Minimum Housing Code," Hester said.

"Before, our system was complaint-driven. Now, we can begin an investigation with a reasonable cause inspection."

When asked if any one district in the city had the greatest needs, Hester said, "We asked the police for a map indicating where the most gunshots were reported and overlaid that map with our records of complaints." The resulting map placed a bull's-eye on the Northeast Central Durham community.

"There are 5,420 rental units in the 279 blocks that comprise the NEC Durham community," Hester said. "Most of these units are single-family duplexes, with no large apartment complexes."

Hester said that shifting demographics in the Northeast Central Durham community have created new demands and a changing culture.

"The last census had a racial mix in the NEC Durham area of 63 percent black, 30 percent Latino and 7 percent white."

Hester said that in response to these changes, the department has divided Durham into five districts, with four inspectors in the NEC community and two in each of the others. Improved response time at Durham's "One Call" phone number has allowed the department to respond much faster to problems as they arise in the community.



Rick Hester, assistant director, and Constance Stancil, director of the Department of Neighborhood Improvement Services, prepare for a presentation before the city council. (Staff photo by Norman Gossett)

"We have the fastest response time of any department in the city," Hester said.

The department's inspectors typically encounter issues ranging from fire damage and junked or abandoned cars to weedy lots filled with debris. If property owners cannot be identified, fixes to these problems, including debris removal, cutting weeds and boarding up houses, are handled by the city Impact Team, Hester said. The costs are recovered by the city through a lien perfected against a property.

If property owners can be found, the department will notify them through two official letters of notice, to which they have a total 60 days to respond. If an owner does not respond to notification by the city, the issue can be resolved in the Community Life Court, which Hester said meets the first Wednesday of every month.

Property owners found guilty of non-compliance can be sentenced to community service.

Hester said his department does not get involved in conflicts between tenants and landlords.

One of the problems he has seen throughout the years is tenants damaging the property they occupy in an attempt to avoid eviction. Hester cautions tenants to avoid involving the department in these types of disputes. "We know the difference between code violations and vandalism."

Hester also noted that the Department of Neighborhood Improvement Services handles dwellings one year and older. The City-County Inspections Department handles new construction and any structure less than one year old.

LEARN MORE ONLINE:

<http://bit.ly/zRk6uF>

<http://bit.ly/Akuigp>