

Apartment developer complains of blight in Algiers

by **Deon Roberts Online Editor** - October 12, 2007

NEW ORLEANS - A Dallas developer spending \$4.2 million rebuilding an apartment complex in Algiers said the city of New Orleans is ignoring his complaints about a blighted apartment complex next door.

But a city spokesman said the city has no record of a complaint.

Howard Gyler, owner of Oakmont Apartments, formerly Shadowbrook Apartments, said Higgins Gate Apartments has been shuttered since Hurricane Katrina and is beyond repair. Gyler also says "crackheads" from Higgins Gate, 2646 Westbend Parkway, are climbing the fence and trespassing at Oakmont, 2200 Westbend Parkway.

"We catch them climbing the fence," he said. "They could have potential criminal intentions. We've caught them stealing from our property."

Gyler said he chases the trespassers off his property about three times a week.

Higgins Gate officials could not be reached for comment.

Gyler said he's called the city four times and faxed the city twice to put Higgins Gate on the city's blighted property list. But the property keeps disappearing from the list, he said.

City spokesman James Ross said Thursday the city has "no record of an official complaint regarding this property from (Gyler). The first communication from him of which we are aware was received earlier this week."

Ross said City Councilman James Carter's staff Thursday told Mayor C. Ray Nagin's Office of Communication that Carter's office had received complaints from Gyler.

Even though no official complaint about Higgins Gate had been filed, the city Thursday inspected the exterior of the property, Ross said. But a thorough inspection was not possible because the property is fenced, he said.

"During this inspection, we found the property to be public nuisance, based on the exterior defects of the structure," Ross said. "A letter to that effect will be mailed to the owner of Higgins Gate" today, he said.

The city will reinspect the property in 30 days, Ross said. After the 30 days, the property can be scheduled for an administrative hearing. If the owner is found guilty or the property is found blighted, it will be eligible for city expropriation.

Gyler is frustrated with the city, which he said is selectively enforcing blight laws — but not in Algiers.

"What's fascinating is the city seems to be in such a hurry to enforce the blight law against people in the Ninth Ward and the Lower Ninth Ward," Gyler said. "Why would you enforce a law against people without money and not enforce the law against people with money?"

Kimberly Parker, spokeswoman for Carter, who represents the area, Thursday said, "We're doing our best to resolve his (Gyler's) complaint."

Carter's office received the complaint from Gyler just this week, Parker said. Gyler is not the only resident who has complained about Higgins Gate, she said.

"We have been working on it and trying to find a resolution, but we need more than three days to do that," she said.

Carter's office has made calls to the Nagin administration regarding Higgins Gate, Parker said.

"We don't control the blight list at all," she said. "That's controlled by the mayor's office."

Gyler said he paid \$15 million Sept. 5 for the 336-unit Shadowbrook. Renovations should take eight months, he said.

Gyler has been scouting the West Bank since Katrina to buy apartments and repair them to provide post-Katrina housing to low-income and market-rate tenants.

He planned to buy the 276-unit Higgins Gate, but the deal fell apart over title issues, he said. Gyler is suing the owners in state and federal court over the failed sale.

He is also renovating the former Riverchase apartments at 200 Holmes Blvd. in Gretna.

Gyler said he plans to buy 1,155 apartments in Algiers.

"As an investor, I want to understand why I should invest close to \$50 million in Algiers when we can't even enforce the blight law on a property that has experienced serious water damage and at this point can't be repaired," he said in an e-mail Thursday to city officials.

Parker said Carter's office is taking Gyler's complaints seriously.

"We certainly would hate to see him leave," she said. •