

Joliet presses owner of complex Criticism mounts in wake of killing

By Karen Mellen
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Both sides in the controversy over what to do with the Evergreen Terrace housing complex in Joliet agreed Monday that a fatal shooting over the weekend was proof something needs to be done at the 356-unit complex, but they disagreed over how.

Joliet city leaders called a news conference to urge the owners and managers of the low-income housing complex to cede control of the property, saying "slumlike conditions" will not improve under their authority.

"We said it was a dangerous place," said James Shapard, deputy city manager.

But representatives of Chicago-based Burnham Management said the kind of violence that occurred early Saturday would not have happened if the city had not blocked a proposal to make repairs to the building and renew a federal subsidy for the complex.

To generate money to make repairs to the building, including improved security, Burnham Management wants to restructure the facility's debt and renew the Section 8 contract. Under that program, low-income residents pay 30 percent of their income in rent and the federal government makes up the difference between that and fair market rent.

"I think it's very unfortunate the City of Joliet is intent upon depriving low-income residents of housing," said Ronald Gidwitz, whose family has controlling interest in Burnham. "They're basically, I would argue, standing in the way of improved security at Evergreen Terrace."

In the Saturday killing, Joliet Police Chief David Gerdes said, Charles Littlejohn, 40, who had addresses in Chicago and Joliet, was shot in the neck about 6 a.m. Saturday in the hallway of an apartment building in the 300 block of North Broadway Avenue.

Littlejohn, who did not live in the complex, crawled from the hallway where he was shot to the front lawn, police said. The shooting was reported to 911 about 7:20 a.m. by a caller saying a body was in the front yard, Gerdes said.

One resident heard a gunshot about 6 a.m. and did not call 911, and another person saw the body just before 7 a.m. and also did not call police, Gerdes said. Littlejohn was dead when police arrived, and based on the severity of the gunshot wound, he likely would not have survived even if someone had called sooner, the chief said.

"I think it's the complacency," Gerdes said of the inaction on the part of the other residents. "It's similar to the large number of false alarms that we have here. People don't even come out of their apartments for fire alarms."

Gerdes said it appeared that drugs may have been involved in the killing of

Littlejohn.

Rev. Chris Groh, pastor of St. Mary Nativity Catholic Church, which is close to Evergreen Terrace, spoke at the news conference to show support for the city on this issue. "I think the city has a good program to find better housing for the residents there," Groh said.

Earlier this month, city leaders submitted a relocation proposal for residents to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. Last month, city officials met with HUD Secretary Mel Martinez in Washington, and Martinez told them he would not support the refinancing plan requested by Burnham.

But Burnham officials and housing advocates say they still hope to have HUD approve the debt restructuring, arguing that tens of thousands of rental units for poor people are lost each year because landlords opt out of the program.

In this case, Burnham officials say that if allowed, they would improve security and stop people who are unauthorized visitors from gaining access to the apartments.

In a statement released Monday afternoon, Burnham said these security measures would include an entrance gate, security cameras and identification for residents.

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