

## Rental inspections up for debate

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*Editor's note: An earlier version of this story was edited to fix an error.*

GREENSBORO — City officials may reopen the debate about a controversial rental housing inspection program.

The program has been broadly praised for decreasing the amount of unsafe housing in the city.

The number of complaints about bad housing has dropped from about 2,000 in 2003 to fewer than 500 last year.

The amount of substandard houses also declined to 705 units last year.

But a city advisory board plans to consider revising the Rental Unit Certificate of Occupancy program at the prompting of Councilwoman Nancy Vaughan, who questioned the program's costs.

The program requires rental housing to be inspected, even if there are no complaints that it is a blighted property.

City staffers, including Engineering and Inspections chief Butch Simmons, have argued the pro-active inspection approach is necessary to root out the city's slums. "With the amount of staff you have and as big as the city is, you never know where all the problems are," Simmons said.

But Vaughan wondered whether the program is worth the cost. The entire local ordinance division, which includes the rental inspection section, will cost the city \$980,000 this year.

"I just don't know how well our money is being spent," Vaughan said. "Why not just wait for the complaints?"

On Thursday, the advisory board appointed a subcommittee to review the issue and report back to the City Council later this year.

The city program requires that all rental homes, apartments and condos be inspected and have a certificate of occupancy before they can be rented. Landlords who violate the law can face stiff fines from the city.

Since 2003, city inspectors have issued certificates for more than 35,000 homes, designating that the rentals were safe places to live.

The program has drawn the ire of property managers and landlords, who have argued it is a waste of city resources to inspect the quality units along with blighted properties.

On Thursday, the rental advisory board members debated the idea of going back to a complaint-driven system.

"We want to now zero in on these property owners that just don't maintain the minimum property standards. We want to focus in on the repeat offenders," said board member Jeff Sims.



Michael McQueen

The Greensboro skyline.

The city's local ordinance division, which oversees the rental certification program, has already scaled back its inspections.

This year they will do only about 700 checkup inspections to ensure formerly certified homes are being kept up to standards.

Donna Newton, the liaison to the Greensboro Neighborhood Congress, said the checkups help ensure housing stays up-to-code.

Board members also argued that the city should continue to enforce deadlines to fix problem properties and to fine owners who don't follow the rules.

Both, observers say, have forced property owners to keep up the quality of the housing.

"Keep all the things that keep everyone going in the right direction," said board member Bobby Akin.

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