

Law

Pro bono: Choosing the right weapon to save a community

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Daily Record Legal Affairs Writer
November 3, 2008

Bryan Dunn walks out of his house in Baltimore's Seton Hill neighborhood in the morning and sees drug vial tops on the sidewalk.

There are usually broken vials across the street in St. Mary's Park.

When he comes home at night, he can sometimes see prostitutes plying their trade in cars or between houses.



Dunn and other members of the Seton Hill Association blame the Orchard Mews apartment complex, which sits at Pennsylvania Avenue and Orchard Street, steps from Dunn's house and yards from the park. He said most people who live at the complex, which accepts Section 8 subsidized-rent recipients, are good neighbors, but some deal drugs, attracting drug users and prostitutes.

The association is not fighting the complex's right to exist but wants management to be accountable for the problems, Dunn said. It wants better lighting, off-duty police officers working security, eviction of drug offenders and enforcement of a youth curfew. The neighbors have been talking with the city and management for years but the crime continues, he said.

Enter Alexandra Strubing Paradise, a Catonsville solo practitioner and former director of Baltimore City's Property Based Crime Solutions program, under which the city investigates alleged nuisance properties and can even step in and shut one down. The association was referred to Paradise by the Community Law Center, a housing advocacy group. She is representing the neighbors pro bono.

"She knows all the laws and what should be expected of properties and what the city can do," Dunn said. "She is sort of our voice on this."

A representative of the management company, whose name was provided by Dunn and Paradise, did not return a call for comment.

Paradise said the association has several options for dealing with the property.

They can continue to meet with management and ask the city to take action against the complex, she said.

They can, as an association, sue the owners of Orchard Mews under the drug nuisance abatement law, which allows a court to order dealers off the property or require owners to submit a plan for abating the crime.

Paradise said there is a major problem with that option: It would require association members to appear in court and talk about the property.

"It's very dangerous to go to court and testify against drug dealers and then go back and live in the neighborhood," she said.

The neighbors could also try to get the case taken up by Property Based Crime Solutions. The state's attorney then would go after the property in a civil action and the association would not be a party to those proceedings. That would alleviate the safety concerns, Paradise said.

She said that when she was with the city — she left in 2006 — she actually got a nuisance property padlocked by using this procedure.

Paradise said the Seton Hill residents are facing the same problem as many other communities in Baltimore. She said residents should know that they have options for dealing with nuisance properties.

Asked why, if crime has been so prevalent in the neighborhood for years, he doesn't move, Dunn said he's devoted to the house, the neighborhood and city living.

"We all love the convenience of living downtown," Dunn said. "We don't want a suburban lifestyle. We just want to have a normal lifestyle in the city. We like Baltimore city and we're not going to say, 'They don't have the formula right so we're going to leave.'"