

Safety and Security Ordinance is needed

I wanted to respond to your Thursday editorial, “City shouldn’t force complexes to add security features.” Your editorial says that I made a “well-intentioned, compelling case” for requiring crime plagued apartment complexes to have security. However, the editorial concludes that “...extra security...shouldn’t be seen as a means for replacing the basic police protection the city is obligated to provide all its citizens.” I could not agree more. Private security can enforce lease provisions against renting to drug dealers and apartment rules that the police cannot. Enforcing those leases and rules are critical in maintaining a safe and secure environment.

The City of Columbia recently did a Gang Assessment that was conducted by the University of South Carolina and Benedict College. That study demonstrated that a great deal of the drug and gang activity as well as domestic violence and violent crime are clustered in several large, federally funded, apartment complexes in Columbia. *The State* just finished a series of articles about North Columbia and reported the same findings. These apartments receive hundreds of thousands of federal dollars through project based Section 8 vouchers, federal tax credits for low income housing, or individual Section 8 vouchers. I and a number of City Council members went to Washington twice and met with HUD officials to see if the Federal government would require the apartment owners to have a safety and security plan. The Federal government, since it provides subsidies for housing in these complexes, should require security just as it has structural safety requirements. We concluded that the Federal government was not going to take action, and the best approach would be a local ordinance. The residents of these complexes are the victims of these crimes. They deserve the same level of safety as every other citizen.

A safety and security plan would have several provisions including enforcing lease provisions against renting to those who sell drugs, lighting and fencing, and security guards if needed. A safety and security plan is not a substitute for the police. Security guards can do things the police cannot: enforce lease provisions against renting to those convicted of drug crimes, enforce rules of the apartment established by the property owner such as a curfew; screen persons for trespassing more effectively; and stay onsite

permanently. It's not appropriate for city police to stay in one apartment 24 hours a day and act as private security, at the neglect of nearby areas.

Gable Oaks is an example of success. The former owner hired private guards and instituted other measures earlier this year that transformed one of the city's toughest housing complexes into a safe community. The City Police and the Richland County Sheriff worked in partnership with Gable Oaks to produce this safer community. The City, of course, has the obligation to provide protection for our citizens. A Safety and Security Ordinance is part of a larger strategy to fight crime in Columbia. Chief Tandy Carter is preparing his comprehensive plan for the Police Department. This year's City budget that was adopted in June included monies for our Pay and Retention Plan for both police and firefighters that will total \$2.5 million phased over three years. Additionally, this year's budget includes funding for 14 additional officers with seven added in this fiscal year and seven in the next. The City is implementing a security camera system, our Gang Initiative, as well as our Criminal Domestic Violence Task Force. A Safety and Security Ordinance should be part of that strategy.

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