

Fresno officials say ‘strike team’ will crack down on problem housing

By John Ellis
jellis@fresnobee.com

Fresno is assembling a code enforcement strike team to crack down not only on blight in the city’s apartment complexes and other multifamily developments but also substandard living conditions inside individual units.

“Those negligent owners who’ve allowed their properties to deteriorate, consider yourselves on notice,” City Manager Bruce Rudd said at a Tuesday news conference.

The announcement was made at the Summerset Village Apartments, a central Fresno complex where hundreds of tenants – mostly Southeast Asian immigrants – have been without heat or hot water since Nov. 12, when PG&E shut off the gas because of safety concerns.

Since the city learned of the outages Nov. 20, Summerset Village has become the focal point of the deplorable living conditions of some Fresno residents. The strike force is a direct result of the Summerset fallout, even though activists had long called for the city to get more serious about code enforcement inspections, especially in the interior of homes.

In the next month, the city will work with organizations such as the Fresno Housing Authority and advocates to help identify properties that need code inspections. Individuals living in substandard housing are encouraged to call the city, as well.

As part of the plan, two code enforcement officers will be reassigned to the city manager’s office and report directly to Rudd. This team will work up a list of multifamily residential properties that have a history of known or significant code enforcement violations. The city will also look at calls for service for both police and fire, as well as the age of the facility and the number of units.

“This isn’t necessarily going to be a code-focused kind of an effort but more comprehensive in the way that we start taking a proactive approach to landlords or property owners who believe it is acceptable to allow their properties to deteriorate to the point that we found here at Summerset,” Rudd said.

It’s about time, Council Member Clint Olivier said. Summerset Village is in his district.

“Property owners, slumlords, you are seeing the city of Fresno take a dramatic first step toward correcting the mess that you have created,” Olivier said. “I just regret that it took this crisis, this humanitarian crisis, to finally get the ball rolling toward creating safer and cleaner neighborhoods for everyone.”

After the list is assembled – about six weeks from now – the city will start making random unannounced, unscheduled inspections of the properties. Rudd said owners will have about six weeks to fix up their properties – or be cited by the city and then be billed for repairs the city would undertake. If a property owner refuses to grant the city access to the inside of an apartment, the city will seek an “inspection warrant,” which Fresno City Attorney Doug Sloan said, unlike a criminal search warrant, is fairly routine to obtain.

Sloan said there could even be criminal prosecutions for the worst offenders. Chris Henry, the out-of-town Summerset owner, would not be one of those, Sloan said, because he is cooperating with the city’s request to make repairs.

For tenants, there is a possible downside.

“As with any aggressive code action, we do anticipate there is going to be some unintended consequences,” Rudd said.

At Summerset Village, for example, city officials estimated the complex’s population at around 500 to 600 people, based on its 220 units. The actual population was 1,800 or maybe even higher. That violates state fire codes, Rudd said.

“You can’t have eight people living in a one-bedroom apartment,” he said.

Because some people may need to be relocated, Rudd said the city will set aside \$30,000 as seed money for a relocation fund.

John Ellis: [559-441-6320](tel:559-441-6320), [@johnellis24](https://twitter.com/johnellis24)