

HOUSING

Dallas tenants counter 'unbearable' conditions

Residents will demand solutions to 'risky' apartment conditions



Water leaks like this are common complaints at some rental apartments in the Bachman Lake area. Tenants are demanding the city force landlords to promptly fix violations. (María Ramos Pacheco/Staff)

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Al Día

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Leaky roofs, moldy walls and ceilings, pest infestation, and overall hazardous conditions are common complaints at some rental apartments in Dallas' Bachman Lake area.

Now tenants are partnering with housing advocacy organizations to demand that the city implement a stricter code compliance system and force landlords to fix violations promptly.

On Wednesday, residents will join Dallas Area Interfaith, Bachman Lake Together and Lumin Education in a meeting with city officials to demand solutions to what they describe as "risky and unbearable living conditions" in many units.

"We are ready to speak up, and we are not scared anymore. All the things we went through are helping us to move forward," said Claudia Cruz, 38, a mother of three children who lives in an apartment in the area. "We are not victims, we are organizers now, and we want the city and those in charge to work with us."

The organizations supporting the tenants' demands have a long-standing imprint in the area, mainly on early childhood education, health care and job training programs. But at community meetings at the Bachman Lake Together Family Center last summer, they kept hearing about substandard living conditions in the apartments.

City not doing enough

Parents were concerned about the safety of their children and complained the city wasn't doing enough or responding fast enough whenever they complained on the 311 emergency line.

"The moms and dads said, 'Enough,'" said Cameron Conner, an adviser with Dallas Area Interfaith. "They have a lot of energy and anger, and they want to do something to change these issues."

As of 2022, the area had 43 apartment complex properties registered with the city, with around 500 buildings and more than 7,000 units for rent. About 2 in 3 residents are Hispanic.

Dallas City Council member Omar Narvaez said he supports the idea of community neighbors banding together to demand effective action from the city.

“I am aware of the issues facing the District 6 multifamily complexes in Bachman Lake,” he said.

The city attorney’s office is also part of this conversation. Two apartment complexes in the Northwest Dallas area are under litigation.

“The problem keeps growing. More families live in deplorable conditions more often. Every day we learn about new apartments with issues. The voice starts to spread,” said housing advocate Conner, who has been working with parents in the area.

Intimidation tactics

Housing advocates say some landlords not only are slow to respond when tenants report issues with their units, but also engage in intimidation.

“They are afraid because when they complain to management and ask for things to be resolved, they face retaliation with questions like, ‘Where is your Social Security card?’” said Tanya Tanksley, family and community partnerships coordinator for Lumin Education.

Many tenants in the area are immigrants.

“Parents are afraid. They don’t want to lose the place where they live [but they] live with the fear of being punished or evicted if they report their apartment’s problems to the city,” Tanksley said.

Retaliation against renters is prohibited, according to the Texas Property Code.

Amy Del Toro, a multi-tenant facility supervisor for the city’s Code Compliance department, said that many residents fear reporting issues in their units and that others are unaware of how to report them.

But she said the city has been making an effort to reach out and educate area residents on how to navigate the system.

Chapter 27 of Dallas City Code establishes minimum property standards to ensure that all “residential buildings, structures, and premises are safe, sanitary, and fit for tenants.”

Among some of the key elements in the code are to guarantee that roofs are not leaking, no holes are in walls or flooring, and there is a quick response to reports of mold and pest infestation.

One of the main concerns in some of the Bachman Lake-area units is mold, an issue the Environmental Health Division of Dallas County Health and Human Services inspects, not the city.

Code compliance

When minimum property standards are violated, residents can report them to Code Compliance by calling 311. The case is then assigned to a code inspector. Depending on the severity of the problem, the inspector visits the complex or calls the management office to check whether the issue has been addressed.

Bachman Lake-area tenants said this process is flawed and drafted a list of proposed solutions they'll deliver at Wednesday's meeting.

Their list asks for a 30% increase in inspections in complexes receiving a score of 75 or lower. Currently, properties are inspected once at least every three years, and a score of 70 or lower means failing. The maximum is 100.

Another proposal is to adopt a "Chronic Nuisance Abatement Ordinance" for "habitual nuisance" units. Also, they plan to ask the city to invest in a "Cooperative Code Compliance Model" that provides apartment owners with incentives to improve conditions.

The organizations and community leaders have spoken with representatives in Austin and San Antonio to better understand how other cities' code enforcement works. They also work with the nonprofit Child Poverty Action Lab and Parkland Health to better understand how these issues affect child development.

In January, Code Compliance started holding monthly meetings at the Bachman Recreation Center to inform residents about their rights and how to report violations. No one showed up at that first meeting, but since a soccer field is next to the recreation center, the inspectors decided to go there and talk with area residents.

The majority of the people they spoke to were Spanish speakers and feel forgotten by the city, Del Toro said.

At a second meeting, more people attended and spoke about issues in their units.

Tanksley said she has helped several families to report issues to the 311 lines.

The 311 line offers an option for Spanish speakers. But the app and the online portal are only available in English.

Theopolus Rhodes, a manager in Code Compliance's Single-Family Rental Program, said that working with external community-based organizations is key to communicating with residents.

"We want to help, but if the residents are not coming forward and calling 311, we don't know what is happening," Rhodes said.

City officials say they plan to keep working on communication issues with the Bachman Lake residents, and the Office of Integrated Public Safety Solutions, created in April 2020, will be part of that, its interim director said.

“Getting the feedback from the community on what they know, they live their day and they know what the problems are better than we do,” said the interim director, Kevin Oden, who added that people from his office will be at the Wednesday meeting. “They can give us very good recommendations on how the property could be improved.”

The office is gathering data to craft a plan tailored to the Bachman Lake community.

Bachman Lake residents facing issues with their apartments can get in touch with the advocacy organizations by calling Dallas Area Interfaith at 214-689-5988 or emailing dallasareainterfaith1@gmail.com.

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