

Reclaiming a Neighborhood

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Nick Pavlovich's dog barked up a storm one night in February on the first floor of his Liberty Square townhouse. The racket made Pavlovich walk downstairs to see what all the fuss was about.

Turns out, the dog had good reason for making the racket.

A bullet had been fired through the front door and across the living room. It was pure luck, and a pleasant surprise, that Pavlovich was upstairs at the time, and not injured. It was not a surprise that a bullet hit his home. Pavlovich knew it was just a matter of time.

For years, residents at the 151-unit Ypsilanti Township condominium complex on Grove Road just west of Rawsonville Road have been kept up at nights by screaming and gunshots in the parking lots. Some nights, and days, tenants couldn't drive through the streets of the complex – they were choked with the cars of drug dealers and their customers.

Things started to change a few weeks ago when the homeowners association took matters into their own hands and hired a private security firm to provide armed guards to patrol the complex at night.

According to Pavlovich, who works as a security aide at the state Center for Forensic Psychiatry, homeowners started moving out and the value of the units fell as the drug dealers and prostitutes moved in. Today, only about 10 percent of the homes are occupied by the owner.

Pavlovich said he was afraid to go out at night. Many of the units are bored up, but still used by drug dealing squatters, according to Pavlovich and Bonnie Hartsock, who owns 58 of the units. Some tenants are drug dealers. The value of the townhouses fell to about \$15,000, and according to Pavlovich, some have been sold to speculators for as little as \$3,000 in back taxes.

So when the former manager quit in February, Pavlovich volunteered to act as an unpaid manager.

About three weeks ago, after he found unspent association dues in a bank account, Pavlovich hired S.I.A. Protective Services and Investigations for security. Now four armed guards in black uniforms patrol the complex each night.

Residents, most of whom are still too uneasy to allow their names to be printed in the newspaper; say there is no more drug dealing in the parking lots. They believe some units are still used for drug trafficking, but they are thankful it's off the street. There's no longer the sound of gunfire late in the night.

Until now, "police came in after something happened," Pavlovich said. Now, "security is here to prevent it from happening."

If nothing else, the guards keep watch – and sometimes videotape activity. They're willing to testify in court. No one who lived there, Pavlovich said, has been brave enough to do that.

One resident said she's lived at Liberty Square four years, but will move despite the fact that now, "it's been quiet at night, at least they're not shooting."

The homeowners association is requiring owners to get criminal background checks on all tenants and using a lawyer to force owners to evict or refuse to accept tenants with felony records.

Washtenaw County Sheriff's Lt. Troy Bevier said calls to the complex have remained steady for three years, at about 45-52 calls a year, mainly for disorderly conduct, noise, and calls about suspicious persons or drug dealing. The number isn't all that high, but Bevier expects calls to increase now but only because of the security guards, who are willing to call police.

S.I.A. Protective Services and Investigations owner John Tabb III said his guards are ready to deal with trouble if necessary – they carry handguns and have shotguns locked in their patrol vehicles – but have never fired at anyone or been fired upon. He said all his guards are former police, military police, or armed services personnel, and all have valid concealed weapons permits. They do not, however, have any special police powers.

Tabb also said that while the state of Michigan requires no training for private security guards, he requires his 17 employees to be trained in state-certified weapons, tactics and negotiations programs.

He recounted one incident at Liberty Square in which a known drug dealer and his girlfriend started fighting in the parking lot. He said the guards tried to separate the pair and calm them down, but the dealer went into his truck to get a gun and threatened to shoot the guards.

Instead, Tabb said, the guards kept talking to the man, separated the couple, and ended the situation without any weapons involved. When something happens that they can't quiet, he said, they call the sheriff's department for backup.

According to Tabb, a woman at Liberty Square recognized the guards on their first day on the job, from the work they've done at the former Leforge Villa apartments on the north side of Ypsilanti Township. "Y'all in trouble now," he said she warned others in the parking lot.

Leforge Villa, now called Dover Place, has been the site of multiple undercover police narcotics investigations and shootings over the years. According to Tabb and a worker at the complex, it took a full year and the evictions of 47 troublesome tenants to make those problems virtually a thing of the past.

It's the same story at the Riverrain Apartments just across Huron River Drive from the Eastern Michigan University campus in Ypsilanti. The complex, occupied mainly by students, is often a target of break-ins, according to police reports. Manager Caroline Gorr keeps those S.I.A. Protective Services and Investigations guards unarmed, but she said the problems at the complex are now virtually nonexistent.

Ypsilanti Police Capt. Matt Harshberger said all of his department's contacts with the company have been professional and effective.

At Liberty Square, it will take more than just security patrols to turn things around, but there is action on a number of fronts.

Problems at Lake in the Woods apartments, across Grove Road from Liberty Square, have pushed Ypsilanti Township into considering a new ordinance that would allow the township to demand inspection of the 15,000 township rental units, according to building inspector George Chapman. Such inspections are not currently allowed without an invitation from the residents.

Without the township's urging, the Liberty Square board has trimmed its trees so residents can see porch lights.

The Liberty Square board asked the township to cut down bushes on nearby township property, so no one can hide there, and the board is working on doubling the number of street lights within the complex.

Hartsock owns the largest block of the townhouses through her company, B Investments, and she wants to buy more. She uses one of them as her office. She said she is working to evict troublesome tenants and renovate her units.

One tenant evicted this month left the unit a wreck. The carpet is so filthy it was slippery.

The walls were covered in dirt, it smelled and holes were punched in doors. The bathroom had not been cleaned in months.

The renovations include new carpet, a paint job, new kitchen cabinets, and flooring, and window blinds. Some get new furnaces and water heaters.

She's willing to spend the money on repairs and security, she said, because, "I'll do anything to give the people here a safe environment."

Pavlovich said the cost of security will soon force a boost in the \$110 monthly association dues at Liberty Square to about \$167.

But, he said, "this isn't just an expense. It's an investment. How much is security worth? When you have bullets coming through your door and your windows, how much is it worth?"

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