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City housing debate rages on

It is unknown where the council may go with the issue. Of the six members, only Marion Blackburn and Dennis Mitchell have openly expressed their stance.

By Wesley Brown
Thursday, August 9, 2012

Michael Schinasi has never had any problem finding people to rent a 2,700-square-foot house he owns near East Carolina University.

But at least one always seems to go empty.

“They become big closets that attract bugs,” Schinasi said.

Schinasi is part of an emerging group of people in Greenville who see underused city homes as “wasted resources,” where unfilled spaces spawn less-than-livable conditions: crime, trash and pests.

Their push to change a long-standing city law that limits to three the number of unrelated people who can share a residence has divided the city.

Homeowners, community activists and historians have banded together to preserve neighborhoods; developers, landlords and real estate agents have partnered to lift the cap to fill area rentals to full capacity.

Each have descended on City Hall at different times, or adopted resolutions, to make their cases known. Today, the debate will enter its sixth month.

The City Council’s meeting tonight at 7 in City Hall may offer some insight into who has made the strongest case.

Options offered
Along with public comments, council members will hear a report on alternatives to modifying what has been dubbed the “three-unrelated” rule and provide staff with direction.

“There is the potential for a vote,” City Attorney Dave Holec said.

Holec said the council has the authority to call for an amendment to the policy, ask for a study to be pursued or move to drop the debate altogether.

If an amendment to city law is desired, Holec’s staff would draw up a bill for the Planning and Zoning Commission to review. Once a recommendation is returned, a final vote would go to the council. Public hearings would be held before each board.

It is unknown where the council may go with the issue. Of the six members, only Marion Blackburn and Dennis Mitchell have openly expressed their stance.

Blackburn has opposed changing city housing standards, instead supporting an amendment that would require landlords get a “privilege” license to rent property.

Mitchell backed Blackburn’s proposal, but with a twist of his own.

**Preservation zone**

Mitchell wants to create a Neighborhood Preservation Zone around the Tar River-university neighborhood area, a plan that, among other things, includes an administrative exception to allow a fourth unrelated person to live in homes where tax records show there are at least four original bedrooms.

Schinasi is not against having an ordinance. He just wants something more reasonable and effective.

He and his wife, Meryl Schinasi, first bought their rental home off 10th Street in 1986 and lived in it 10 years before opening it up to college students and families.

They screen their perspective tenants, review city ordinances with them and limit the house to three unrelated people.

But despite their efforts, a party will slip past their view from time to time, and city code enforcement officers end up at their doorstep citing them for excessive trash.
Greenville resident Andrew Morehead, an opponent to change, feels Schinasi’s pain, as he admits there are correlations between an increase in crime, trash and parking with an increase in rental properties.

But Morehead said once housing standards are changed and homes are renovated to accommodate more renters it is going to be very difficult to revert them back to their original state.

**Property values**

Morehead said if the council decides against a citywide change and votes to alter the rules in a specific neighborhood, it is going to “damage” property values and make it more difficult for landlords to fill rentals.

Some areas of the city have vacancy rates as high as 13 percent, Morehead said.

“All time four people rent a property,” Morehead said, “that is one less person who is going to rent someone else’s property.”

The City Council also will hold public hearing today at City Hall for:

Rezoning 2.25 acres of property at the northwest corner of Manhattan Avenue and Chestnut Street from office residential to downtown commercial for the Greenville Community Life Center to expand.

Rezoning 41 acres of foreclosed property along the southern right-of-way of Regency Boulevard from single- to multi-family residential for the possible development of a high-rise apartment building.

Contact Wesley Brown at 252-329-9579 or wbrown@reflector.com. Follow him on Twitter @CityWatchdog.
As president of the Forest Hills Neighborhood Association, I urge the City Council to reconsider changing the “rule of three.” Residents of our neighborhood cherish the mix of families and retirees living here.

We welcome renters who are related to one another, who frequently choose Forest Hills because of its proximity to schools and employment. We see many neighbors walking dogs, running, pushing strollers, riding bikes and doing yard work. These folks routinely help each other in a myriad of small but important ways. We gladly offer and gratefully receive the many benefits of neighborly relationships developed over years.

By contrast, students and other unrelated renters are busy with studies or building careers. They are not yet at the stage of life where they want to put down roots and invest in a home, a yard, a community or neighbors. Almost by definition, groups of three or more unrelated renters are just passing through, and are unlikely to care about the appearance of their yard, cars parked on the grass, loud parties at night, or to invest their time in neighborhood projects, much less develop relationships that last a lifetime. By changing the “rule of three,” City Council will be putting the interests of a very few rental property investors over the hopes and dreams of homeowners throughout Greenville who have invested not only their money and hard work, but a lifetime of caring for one another in profound ways. Greenville residents are overwhelmingly in favor of keeping the “rule of three” as evidenced by their survey responses and questions voiced at all three public forums.

The residents of Forest Hills neighborhood are also overwhelmingly against changing this rule that has served us so well for 30 years.

We ask the council to please not put at risk the strong neighborhood community that has taken so many years for us to build.

CAROLINE W. DOHERTY
Greenville
Keeping the three-unrelated rule is critical for Greenville’s family neighborhoods. Ending the rule would undermine the quality of life which fuels economic growth and job creation in Greenville by attracting families and businesses to our city.

Many homes which had rented to single families would become open to unrelated individuals who could pay the rent by going in together in large numbers. Such renters would dramatically change the nature of neighborhoods and disturb the peace established families now enjoy.

Greenville homeowners work hard to live in quiet family neighborhoods with rising not declining property values. All Greenville homeowners should be concerned.

For example, with PCC at one end of town and ECU at the other, every neighborhood in Greenville is an easy commute for students.

The main problem is not renters or students, but real estate speculators looking to rake in even more rental cash at the expense of family neighborhoods. I urge citizens to contact the mayor and City Council to maintain the rule and increase its enforcement. Organized money and organized voters are the powers that sway politicians. Real estate speculators give political contributions to grease the system; the average citizen must remind the politicians in no uncertain terms that their political careers depend on supporting the voters.

THOMAS DOUMAUX
Greenville
Big plans for historic school
By Katherine Ayers
Thursday, August 9, 2012

A local surgeon and his wife are the new owners of the Third Street School property after the Pitt County Board of Education voted to accept their offer of $290,000 at the board’s meeting on Monday.

Dr. Richard Rizzuti and his wife, Meridith, plan to renovate the property, use it for some type of school programs for neighborhood children and possibly use it for vocational training for people who are having trouble finding work.

“If we are able to run the school programs, we’ll need (maintenance) services, so we’re hoping to tie that into the vocational training,” Richard Rizzuti said. “Students can learn landscaping, cooking and catering while at the same time they are serving the school.”

The Rizzutis stressed that they don’t want to be seen as an outside influence coming in to take over the property. Richard Rizzuti, who established Greenville Plastic Surgery, said they are interested in getting local parents involved, offering them their own classes, and allowing them to help transform the property, the neighborhood and the people that live there.

“We’ll do it through building relationships,” Meridith Rizzuti said. “We’re working alongside people who are already in the area, but through volunteering we’re asking and spending time with and building relationships with people already plugged in.”

The Rizzutis are not new to Greenville or the Third Street School area. Richard Rizzuti attended medical school and completed his residency at East Carolina University, then established his plastic surgery practice in 1992.
Meridith came to Greenville as an ECU student in exercise physiology and now stays at home with the couple’s two youngest daughters, ages 10 and 7. They have been involved in the west Greenville neighborhood through ministry projects at Covenant United Methodist Church,

“We’ve just realized that there’s such a goodness down there, a history that needs to be protected and preserved,” Meridith Rizzuti said. “Sometimes the bad parts of a neighborhood will stand out but the positive aspects get looked over and we want to build on those positives.”

Although most of their contact with the neighborhood has been through church, the Rizzutis said their family wants to partner with a nonprofit already in the community as well as other churches in Pitt County. Richard Rizzuti said he hopes to make this project more of an interdenominational effort rather than a ministry of any one specific church.

Ten school board members voted for the sale, and one member, Sean Kenny, voted against the sale. Mildred Council was not present.

Kenny said that although he thinks the Rizzutis are good people, the property should have been kept as an asset to the school system.

He said the west side of Greenville does not have as many educational places as it once did, so the school system could have used it, possibly relocating Pitt Academy, now housed at the Boys & Girls Club of Greenville, or using the building as a vocational school.

Contact Katherine Ayers at kayers@reflector.com and 252-329-9567.
New digital map to help track shoreline erosion

By Kate Elizabeth Queram
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State agencies and environmental contractors may for the first time be able to track erosion rates along the state's estuarine shorelines, courtesy of a digital map released last week by the N.C. Division of Coastal Management.

The map, the end result of a nearly six-year joint project between the state agency and East Carolina University, combines and digitizes thousands of aerial photographs of North Carolina's 12,000 miles of estuarine shoreline, defined as transitional areas along the coast where fresh and salt water meet.

Along the Southeastern coast, that includes the Cape Fear River and Hewletts Creek, among others.

Prior to the map's completion, state officials weren't even sure how many miles of estuarine shoreline existed in the state, and had only a general sense of the number and types of docks and bulkheads in those areas. According to Michele Walker, a spokeswoman for the state Department of Environment and Natural Resources, the majority of those structures existed before the enactment of the Coastal Area Management Act, so the division doesn't have records of them.

"This is information we did not have before," she said. "It's useful for coastal management. It's useful if you're charged with managing the shoreline. It's useful for letting us know what kind of development is out there. We know that in a general way, but this is a lot more specific information."

But for coastal researchers and developers, the map's most useful application will involve tracking the erosion rates along the state's estuaries. The speed of shoreline erosion along the ocean is a well-documented problem in North Carolina, but to this point no erosion data has existed for the estuaries—largely because there were never any baseline shore measurements that could be referenced for comparison purposes. The map changes that, said Spencer Rogers, specialist in coastal construction and shoreline processes with N.C. Sea Grant.

"In the estuaries, there really hasn't been that much comprehensive work done where you could take a snapshot of everything at one time," he said.
"We don't have erosion rates published comprehensively throughout the estuaries. This is really the first step."

The map will be updated on a semi-regular basis, Walker said, which will allow groups like Sea Grant to compare and contrast the health of the shoreline over time without having to physically survey the sites. That information can be useful for a number of things, including planning purposes, Rogers said.

"There is just a whole lot more estuarine shoreline, particularly in North Carolina, than oceanfront," he said. "And in order to make decisions in land-use planning, one of the important issues is how fast things are changing."

**Digital shoreline**

Access the map at [http://dcm2.enr.state.nc.us/Maps/shoreline_mapintro.htm](http://dcm2.enr.state.nc.us/Maps/shoreline_mapintro.htm)

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For-profit colleges under fire for targeting vets

By Franco Ordoñez - Washington Correspondent

WASHINGTON–Howard Toller, a 27-year-old Iraq war Army veteran from Cary, admits the TV commercials lured him in to ITT Technical Institute, with former students speaking to the camera about state-of-the-art training, flexible class schedules and the ease of finding jobs after graduation.

It wasn’t until after Toller sunk much of his post-9/11 GI Bill benefits into the for-profit college that he learned, as a recent Senate Democratic committee report states, that the institution spends more money on marketing than instruction and that less than half of the students finish their associate’s degree.

“It was a dog-and-pony show,” Toller said in an interview. “They made me think that these guys have a good program. It’s not good at all. Nobody talked about how the credits are not transferrable.”

Veterans are turning heavily to for-profit institutions; the committee report found that eight of the top 10 colleges receiving post-9/11 GI Bill money from the Department of Veterans Affairs are for-profit institutions.

The for-profit college industry came under fire this year after the report found that taxpayers spent $32 billion last year on the industry. Fifteen of the largest for-profit colleges received 86 percent of their revenues from federal student aid programs, according to the report, issued by Sen. Tom Harkin, D-Iowa, chairman of the Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee.

Military vets ‘preyed upon’

The issue is playing out in military-heavy states such as North Carolina, which boasts one of the largest veteran and active duty populations in the country.

“They’re really preyed upon by some of these schools,” said retired Marine Col. Robert Songer, the former director of lifelong learning and education services at Camp Lejeune, N.C. “By the time they came to me it was usually too late. ... The schools sign them up for a Pell Grant (and) one, sometimes two student loans, and the student has no idea of this.”
In response to emailed questions, ITT spokeswoman Lauren Littlefield said that all students are told the credits can’t be transferred, and that the information also is in the school’s catalog. Littlefield added that the school has no specific recruiting force or initiative for military personnel.

The schools have a strong incentive to enroll service members and veterans, in large part because of the “90/10 rule,” which puts a 90 percent cap on the amount of annual revenue a for-profit college may receive from federal student-aid programs. But veterans’ and military benefits don’t count toward that 90 percent, and instead are counted as nonfederal funding.

And so, critics say, the service members become particularly valuable for some for-profit colleges whose revenues consistently bump up against the cap.

**The industry’s defense**

The for-profit industry’s trade group, the Association of Private Sector Colleges and Universities, says the country’s military and veteran students have a right to choose the education that best meets their learning styles and the non-traditional student’s need for a flexible schedule.

“The reason we succeed is because veterans tell veterans, ‘This was really good for me and it would be really good for you,’ ” said executive director Steve Gunderson.

North Carolina’s two senators have staked their ground on either side of the debate.

Sen. Kay Hagan, a Democrat and a member of the Senate education committee, has been one of the most active voices against the for-profit college industry, introducing legislation that would prohibit all colleges from using taxpayer money on marketing, advertising and recruitment.

“Many of the for-profits colleges are using this money for anything but helping students succeed,” she said.

**Burr: There’s good and bad**

Sen. Richard Burr, the top Republican on the Veterans Affairs Committee, has charged Democrats with launching an assault against an industry that provides veterans with needed vocational skills and flexible schedules.

“For-profit institutions wouldn’t flourish if there weren’t people who wanted the services,” he said.
Burr acknowledged there some “bad apples” in the mix, but he said big
government is not the answer. And he pointed to the successful programs at
Universal Technical Institute, a for-profit institution based in Tempe, Ariz.,
that runs the Charlotte-area NASCAR Technical Institute, where Republican
presidential candidate Mitt Romney is scheduled to speak Sunday.

Universal Technical Institute was treated more favorably by Harkin’s Senate
committee report, which noted that the school spends far less on marketing
than most for-profits and that half of the students receive their associate’s
degrees or certificates. But the report also noted that UTI received $24.9
million in post-9/11 GI benefits from 2009 to 2011, averaging $22,767 per
veteran, compared with an average of $4,642 per veteran at public colleges.

Bill Odell, vice president of corporate communications for UTI, said the
committee tried its best to find anything to paint the school in a negative
light.

But Odell said the committee can’t argue with the school’s 65 percent
graduation rate and 85 percent employment rate.

“Our students graduate from school, and they get employed,” he said.

NASCAR Tech’s Campus President Jennifer Waber-Bergeron said
Romney’s visit is an opportunity to showcase some of those positive stories
left out of the federal debate.

Schools in politics

This is not the first time Romney has touted the benefits of for-profit
colleges. In January, Romney praised Full Sail University in Florida for
increasing competition and helping “hold down the cost” of education.” The
school is one of the most expensive colleges in America, according to the
U.S. Department of Education.

In April, President Barack Obama signed an executive order to help protect
military families and veterans from aggressive and deceptive recruiting by
higher education institutions, particularly for-profit colleges, seeking their
military benefits. The order required colleges to provide more information
about their student results and financial aid and directed the Veterans Affairs
Department to register the term “GI Bill.”

The Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America last month launched a
campaign warning new veterans and their spouses of “predatory for-profit”
colleges that are targeting GI Bill benefits. Not all the schools are bad, said
Tom Tarantino, the group’s chief policy officer, but he said there are
pervasive bad practices across the industry that are not conducive to students finishing an education that leads to a job.

Attorneys general for 21 states – including North Carolina’s Roy Cooper, Jack Conway of Kentucky, Alan Wilson of South Carolina, Kamala D. Harris of California, Lawrence Wasden of Idaho and Lisa Madigan of Illinois – called on Congress in May to close a loophole they say encourages for-profit colleges to use “high-pressure recruiting tactics” on military veterans and their families.

Toller, the Army veteran and IAVA member from North Carolina, said he wanted a flexible schedule, but he said he also told the recruiter he hoped to eventually move on to get a four-year degree.

Regardless of whether his credits transfer, Toller said, he plans to attend Wake Technical Community College – a public school – next year.

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**For-profit colleges in North Carolina**

While none of the for-profit schools in the Democratic Senate committee report are based in North Carolina, several have local operations.

**University of Phoenix** has locations in Charlotte and Raleigh. It serves approximately 30,000 North Carolina students, with more than half taking online courses.

**Education Management Corporation** runs The Art Institute of Raleigh-Durham and The Art Institute of Charlotte.

**Kaplan Higher Education Corporation** has a Charlotte campus that offers classes in allied health, criminal justice and information technology.

**Bridgepoint Education** serves approximately 4,000 North Carolina students taking online classes. Sources: Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions (HELP) Committee; Federal Staff; company websites
To Prevent A Tragedy, How Much Can A School Do?
by Tovia Smith

A Colorado judge on Thursday will consider whether to lift the gag order in the case of James Holmes, 24, who's accused of killing 12 and wounding dozens more at a movie theater last month.

NPR and other news organizations want access to case files, including a notebook that Holmes reportedly sent to a university psychiatrist before withdrawing from the school that may have described an attack.

The University of Colorado is now reviewing whether there was more they could have done to prevent the shooting. Officials are not commenting on
reports that concerns about the suspect were brought to the university's threat assessment team.

And while Colorado looks at its policies, other schools around the nation are doing the same.

"An immediate reaction for us is, 'Could that happen here?' and, 'What changes should we consider making in order to fill the gap that maybe was apparent there?' " says John Zacker, head of the University of Maryland's Behavior Evaluation and Threat Assessment team.

**Preventing Panicked Over-Reporting**

But as schools scramble to draw lessons from Colorado and tighten their procedures, Zacker says, they're also trying to prevent a panicked reaction on their own campuses. The tendency after a tragedy, he says, is to over-report.

"You know, this can get very difficult," Zacker says. "We all watch those reports, thinking, 'Gee, I've got a fellow in my class that acts that way.' " Suddenly, every little quirk can be seen as suspicious, he says. Also, faculty who would normally engage students who appear troubled become afraid to get involved, and instead, jump right to reporting, Zacker says.

"They would rather not be the person that confronts this individual, for fear that he might be the next one," he says. "And I can understand that."

Threat assessment teams are still relatively new on campuses. Most were set up to act as a kind of clearinghouse for concerns after the 2007 Virginia Tech tragedy, in which student Seung-Hui Cho committed suicide after killing 32 people at the school.

But Gary Margolis, a consultant who helped devise federal standards for threat assessment at colleges and universities, says the quality of such teams varies.

"I don't want to imply that they're not where they need to be," Margolis says. "I think the reality is, it's an ongoing process."

**No Magic Formula**

The University of Colorado team was set up two years ago. Individuals were designated to field concerns and consult on an "as-needed" basis. But experts say the best teams meet regularly — threat or no threat — and include faculty, medical staff and police who are specifically trained in threat assessment.
There's no easy formula for identifying potential threats. In recent years, schools have clung to research showing that perpetrators may share certain characteristics, like being withdrawn, paranoid or unwilling to follow rules. But it's now become equally clear that those behaviors can't predict violence ahead of time.

"What people are looking for is this magic pill of, 'If this behavior, then this action,' " says Gene Deisinger, deputy police chief at Virginia Tech. "And we just not have seen that to be an effective strategy."

Deisinger, who directs Virginia Tech's threat management program, says threat assessment teams would do better to focus on the big picture and how students are interacting with others, rather than on specific traits.

"The trouble with a lot of those laundry lists of behaviors is that practitioners began to apply them as profiles or stereotypes of workplace avengers, campus offenders, etc.," Deisinger says. "And they have just not shown to be a very reliable methodology."

**A 'Hot Industry'**

It's easy to understand why schools may look for what might appear to be quick and easy answers in the wake of tragedies. But Marisa Randazzo, a consultant and former chief research psychologist for the U.S. Secret Service, says many self-proclaimed experts are peddling models that are unproven at best.

"Campus threat assessment became a hot industry," Randazzo says. "And there are some folks out there who are very savvy marketers and have really played up on fears ... selling training that is not provided by qualified trainers."

Threat assessment teams also continue to be bogged down by questions of exactly what to report and when. Federal law now requires schools and therapists to report immediate threats to police. But what about someone who may fall just below that threshold, engaging in something an observer might describe just as "disturbing behavior"?

James Holmes, the former University of Colorado student accused in the mass shooting in Aurora, Colo., by the University of Colorado. The university is reviewing whether more could have been done to prevent the shooting.
Moreover, Gary Margolis says schools also struggle with how far they could — or should — go after a student of concern is expelled or withdraws, as in the case of the Colorado suspect.

Margolis says an administrator could certainly tell local authorities that they know of someone who's of concern to the institution. But, he continues, "I could easily see local law enforcement saying, 'We appreciate the information — we'll add it to the list of the other 3,000 people that are acting strangely today in our city or town. You know, if something happens we'll deal with it.'"

Further complicating matters: What about red flags that might appear off campus?

The University of Maryland's John Zacker points to the Colorado case, where Holmes was apparently denied entry to a shooting range after the owner was alarmed by his behavior.

"Geez, shouldn't you report that?" he asks. "Why should we place greater scrutiny on the college campus administrators than we do for this shooting range, who observed bizarre behavior?"

"We get that scrutiny," Zacker says.

Ultimately, Zacker says, schools can only try their best to connect the dots they have. But, as they know all too well — that might not be enough.