At their August 9 meeting, the Greenville City Council voted to initiate the University Neighborhood Revitalization Initiative (UNRI). While the shorthand for the initiative has become the “3-unrelated rule” it is clear that the proposal is much broader than the number of unrelated renters in one dwelling.

This document sets forth the view of East Carolina University with respect to the UNRI.

We come at this issue from the perspective of student welfare. While our responsibility for on-campus and off-campus students differs significantly, we are clearly concerned with the safety and security of all of our students, regardless of where they live. We also believe it is important that the university and its students be part of the solution.

We have talked, formally and informally, with many people – citizens, council members, business people, and others – to try to understand the positions and concerns of all sides.

Through these discussions, it has become increasingly clear to us that the primary issue is not really how many unrelated renters should live in the same house; the primary issue is the enforcement of the rules we have on the books right now.

There are many ordinances and rules which must be followed by landlords, tenants, and homeowners, encompassing areas such as safety, public nuisance conditions, fire codes, parking, noise, trash, pet control, alcohol consumption, and abandoned vehicle removal. We believe the rules which exist are sufficient.

We support the City of Greenville as it acts to protect the rights and privileges of all residents of Greenville, acknowledging that in neighborhoods made up of young adults, families and senior citizens, the observance of the city ordinances is the key to creating harmony among all the residents. That observance is a responsibility of homeowners, renters, and landlords. We also support Greenville Police and the Office of Code Enforcement to frequently patrol and strictly enforce city ordinances and to penalize all those who violate the ordinances.

Enforcement of our current rules and ordinances appears to be inadequate, regardless of where you live in the city. There are numerous reasons for this, not the least of which is what may be the inadequate number of enforcement officers in the TRUNA neighborhood and throughout the city. The current officers do excellent work; there are just not enough of them. Budgeting for adequate code enforcement never seems to have the same level of urgency as money for more police or firefighters – yet the issues are strongly inter-related.

Another reason for possible inadequate enforcement is that some types of cases are extremely difficult to investigate and substantiate (number of occupants is one example), yet these cases are often the most critical. For actions large and small, enforcement officers must be confident that their good-faith, professionally responsible efforts will be supported by those in positions of authority and by the wider community.
Third, and maybe the most important, is that while a code violation fee can become a lien on the property, that action has almost no effect if the property is never sold. This is why the proposal in the UNRI to attach unpaid code violation fees to property tax bills is extremely important and we strongly support its adoption.

Clarity of focus and an unwavering commitment are necessary to adequately enforce ordinances. We strongly believe that, across the City, if those ordinances and rules which currently exist were strongly enforced, then the TRUNA neighborhood, and indeed all neighborhoods, would be better for all residents.

It is very important that East Carolina University be part of the solution. Here is what we propose to do.

1. For a number of years, ECU has contributed resources to pay half the salary of an incremental enforcement officer for the TRUNA neighborhood. As part of a clear and meaningful commitment to increased enforcement activities, we will agree to contribute additional funds to pay for half the salary of an additional enforcement officer for the TRUNA neighborhood. As was the case with the first officer, there needs to be a clear understanding that the additional individual represents incremental additional enforcement in the area. Further, we will work with the City to determine how we can provide additional assistance to the enforcement officers to help them with their work.

2. University students must be active participants in ensuring they live in a safe and secure environment. We will work to enlighten and energize this community of renters to practice active “good neighbor” actions. These actions will include adhering to The East Carolina Creed which states, among other things, that as an East Carolinian, the student will “respect and appreciate the diversity of our people, ideas and opinions, will be thoughtful and responsible in words and actions, and will engage in purposeful citizenship by serving as a positive role model.” This Creed applies to all students whether they live on campus or off. We need to support student adherence to the Creed and take appropriate actions with respect to those who do not follow existing student conduct rules.

3. ECU will strengthen the services we provide our students when they choose off-campus housing. Our dedicated Off-Campus Student Services office will help students identify off campus housing locations, information on bus service, comparative rent and fee information, and lease information. We will encourage our students to become active participants in neighborhood watch programs and neighborhood associations. The ECU Police off-campus crime prevention officer will partner with Greenville Police to educate students on crime prevention and crime reporting. We will also help students understand their tenant rights and where they need to go for help when they have a problem.

4. We will encourage every student living off campus to avail themselves of City of Greenville services that will help the student and neighboring community have quick and positive response for code compliance concerns and problems. This will include knowing where to report violations of city codes.

5. We will identify ways in which we can encourage and support accurate student-to-student information flows related to housing adequacy, landlord quality, and problem resolution. So often, students know firsthand those properties and landlords which are good and bad, but that information is not systematically captured and made available more broadly.
In summary, we believe that strong enforcement of existing rules and ordinances is the most critical issue before the Greenville community – regardless of where you live. We also believe the university and its students are part of that strong enforcement effort and we have set forth, above, efforts we will undertake to assist. We believe that some of the other components of the UNRI – such as a parking permit plan, a crime free rental addendum, and attaching unpaid code violation fines to the property tax bill – are important and very worthy of support and implementation.

Finally, we also believe that, in the current environment, an increase in the number of unrelated renters will exacerbate the enforcement concerns noted above. Until there is a strong, consistent, and sustained enforcement effort, we cannot support a change from three individuals to four. If, in the future, a sustained enforcement effort occurs, then a change from three to four may be appropriate. We look forward to collaborating with the City and the neighborhood as we jointly continue to work through these issues.