

Improved code compliance cited as city eyes landlord registration

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Port St. Lucie's rental property owners would be required to register with the city government and face more accountability for code violations under legislation being considered by the City Council.

Other cities that enacted landlord registration programs experienced "increasing compliance from landlords and far less code violations," said Greg Hyden, a legal consultant for the city.

But several real estate professionals objected to the proposed landlord registration initiative as an infringement on property rights. "We see this proposal as onerous, as a direct attack on private property rights," said John Slivon, governmental affairs com-

mittee chairman of the local realtors association. "Ultimately the ordinance can and will be viewed as a tax on real estate."

Council members intend to discuss the landlord registration proposal during their annual summer retreat, which runs from July 24-26 at the Community Center.

The council agreed informally at its July 15 meeting to ask code enforcement officials to meet with landlords, realtors and tenants and work with Interim Attorney Jim Stokes on a proposed ordinance.

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"I would like to see us move forward, get some more findings, have a full council and make an educated decision," said Vice Mayor Shannon Martin. Tampa, Miami Gardens, Lake Worth Beach, Coral Springs, Gainesville, Daytona Beach, Delray Beach, Bonita Springs and New Port Richey are among the cities that have landlord registration requirements, city records show.

One reason for the landlord registration initiative is because the city's 18,395 rental houses rack up nearly as many code enforcement cases as the city's 51,973 own-

er-occupied houses. That means about a quarter of the houses account for nearly half of the residential code enforcement cases, city records show.

"I'm going back to properties multiple times having to advise them they need to come into compliance," said Assistant Neighborhood Services Director Mike Lubeck. "I've got to make contact with an owner, who is probably not here, and let them know that their house is in violation and then it comes into compliance."

A handful of companies own more than 100 rental houses in the city, Lubeck said. Some companies own several rental houses, while other landlords own one or two rental units.

Registering landlords would also help police deal with tenants who break the law or disturb the peace, said Neighborhood Services Director Carmen Capezuto.

Registration fees in other cities range from \$25 to \$300 per year, Hyden said.

Landlords who fail to register would not be permitted to rent their property, Hyden said. Code enforcement officials could revoke a landlord's registration for repeated violations.

"If a landlord realizes there is a potential they could lose the ability to rent that property, it incentivizes them to be proactive with the tenant and to ensure ... the property is up to code," Hyden said. The current system requires the city to go through

a lengthy legal process to give a real estate owner a chance to bring their property into compliance with city codes, Hyden said.

Joe Edge, a tax accountant and former mayoral candidate, advised the council to go forward with the landlord registration initiative because a small number of rental unit owners seem to be responsible for most of the problems.

"Typically, those are going to be the landlords who, when they rent their property, all they care about is getting a check from a tenant," Edge said. "When you're a landlord, that is a business. Part of the cost of doing business is maintaining that property to an acceptable standard so we can all enjoy increasing property values." ■