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Renaissance in Fitchburg



CRAIG SCHREINER - State Journal

An array of potted flowers and hanging baskets adds color and life to the otherwise unadorned patios at The Pines Apartments and Townhomes. Bill Bowden, property manager at The Pines, conducts daily inspections of the units using a golf cart, looking for violations such as trash on the grass, grills on patios or structural problems that need to be reported. Part of the former Ridgewood Country Club Apartments, The Pines and The Fairways have undergone a transformation since being under new ownership and management, city officials say.

Rental property formerly known as Ridgewood is faring a lot better.

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FITCHBURG — Three years ago, the mammoth rental property here, then known as the Ridgewood Country Club Apartments, was plagued by fires and hundreds of police calls annually. Four out of 10 apartments were vacant, maintenance problems stacked up and property was eating up city resources.

Today the complex — possibly the state's largest rental property where about 5 percent of this city's residents live and now called The Pines Apartments and Townhomes and The Fairways — has undergone a transformation and is a cleaner, safer place to live, its new owners, managers and city officials say.

Data from the Fitchburg Police Department support that assertion: The total number of police calls to the two sprawling properties was down 71 percent in 2007 from an eight-year high in 2004. Calls for serious and violent crimes are also down since new owners and managers took over in 2005.



State Journal Archives

Fire destroyed a large apartment building — part of what was then the Ridgewood Country Club Apartments — on Post Road in September 2004. A rash of fires, maintenance problems and frequent police calls plagued the complex for years.

Leanne Smith, who lives in The Pines with a roommate, said she'd heard the neighborhood was "troublesome" when she moved into her apartment about five months ago but said so far "we've had nothing but good experiences here."

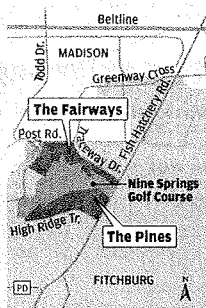
While many are happy with the area and say they've noticed a change, there's still work to do, some residents said this week. Some complained about drugs and noise and said maintenance problems sometimes still go unfixed for weeks.

"The neighborhood has cleaned up a bit, but there's still a lot of drug deals in the

parking lot," said Amy Leatherberry, who has lived in The Pines since January. Plus, "it takes them two weeks to get something done," she said of maintenance problems in her apartment.

The Pines and The Fairways encompass about 60 acres with 51 buildings, 674 units and more than 1,100 residents. The apartments were built in stages between 1968 and 1973.

Fiduciary Real Estate, which took over management of Ridgewood in April 2005 after a mortgage foreclosure lawsuit was filed, manages the apartments and townhouses. E.J. Plesko and Asso-



State Journal

ciates bought the property for \$29 million from Ridgewood Associates in West Allis that August.

Since then, Plesko has invested \$5 million into renovations. The exterior of almost every building has new siding and roofing along with more exterior lighting in the parking lots, said Brandon Scholz, spokesman for Plesko.

On the inside, more than 500 units have been renovated or upgraded including new appliances, carpeting, cabinets, plumbing, air conditioning units, windows and doors, he said.

The company has also opened a second management

Rental

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office in The Pines in addition to the original office located in what is now The Fairways and completely remodeled three Fairway apartment buildings gutted by fire in 2004.

"Right now we're in the process of finishing up putting door locks and intercom systems on building in The Fairways," he said.

The changes appear to have paid off. Police calls for serious crimes such as assault, robbery, arson and theft have dropped 45 percent in 2007 from an eight-year high in 2003. Calls for crimes affecting quality of life, such as vandalism, damage to property and drug offenses also have slowed, down 63 percent in 2007 from a high in 2001.

Fitchburg Police Lt. Chad Brecklin said there are still reports of drug dealing, battery and fights, but "the frequency of some of the more significant incidents have decreased dramatically since it's taken new management."

Meetings productive

City officials and apartment management credit regular meetings of the city's property maintenance, fire and police departments, administrators and property personnel for keeping the rental units on track.

The meetings, where officials go over police calls, get

POLICE CALLS TO THE PINES AND THE FAIRWAYS*

Year	All calls	Serious and violent crimes	Quality-of-life crimes
2000	1115	29	249
2001	1216	40	331
2002	1430	49	265
2003	1514	53	172
2004	1898	45	303
2005	1414	26	196
2006	536	26	99
2007	550	29	121
2008**	451	24	101

*Formerly known as Ridgewood Country Club Apartments

**Through Aug. 4

Note: Serious and violent crimes include burglaries, robberies and assaults; quality-of-life crimes include property damage, drugs, graffiti and noise complaints.

updates on maintenance requests and review eviction and occupancy rates, have been so productive that Brecklin hopes to start similar meetings with other large rental properties in the city.

Kathy Nettesheim, vice president of property management for Fiduciary Real Estate, said when her company took over managing Ridgewood, the stack of building code violations was 8 inches thick.

"When we took over in April (2005) ... the first eight months we did over 2,500 service requests," ranging from a front door not working to water leaks, Nettesheim said. "The owners and managers just did not take care of the property like good and ethical property

managers should," she said.

Efforts to reach the previous owners were unsuccessful. In a 2004 State Journal story about problems at the complex, Harry Marek, of Mukwonago, then one of three out-of-town owners, said complaints about the lack of repairs were "overexaggerated."

Jack Pearson, Fitchburg's property maintenance inspector, said while there's still work to be done, since 2005 the neighborhood has made a "100 percent turnaround," and "calls for service from tenants and staff is way down."

In June and August of 2004, the city notified the former management company of about 350 code violations and about 63 citations totaling

about \$9,000, Pearson said. That did not include individual unit complaints made by residents.

Only two citations

"By comparison, since Fiduciary took over in the spring of 2005 we have only had a handful of complaints and only two citations were issued," he said.

At the height of problems, Pearson operated a full-time office at Ridgewood for most of the summer of 2004.

Now, instead of spending 40 hours a week at the property, he does a drive-through every other day to check the grounds, spending maybe three to four hours at the complex a week.

The improved living conditions also have made the property more attractive to renters. Occupancy at The Pines is now about 93 percent; at the Fairways, it's 87 percent — up from about 60 percent when the property was taken over.

"We feel very confident that both properties will get into the 93 (percent) to 96 (percent) range and stabilize continually by the end of the year," Nettesheim said.

Rent at both locations has risen 1 percent to 3 percent each year since 2006, she said.

Venus Spencer, who recently moved to The Pines from Allied Drive with her fiancé and three children, said the family is enjoying their new three-bedroom apartment.

"I don't see any trouble," Spencer said. "We haven't had any problems since we've been here."