



CITY OF WILLIAMSPORT

BUREAU OF POLICE

Investigations Division Commander

SETTING THE RECORD STRAIGHT

Over the past several months there have been many articles and editorials written about the City of Williamsport's Landlord/Tenant Registration Ordinance. Many of the articles and editorials have been slanted one way or another by individuals with a vested interest in the outcome of the ordinance.

As the person responsible for drafting the ordinance, I believe that it is time to set the record straight. I believe that the taxpaying public deserves to know the truth not rumors and opinions spoken as fact through numerous media outlets.

Part of the problem is that the partnership between the police and the public has degenerated to the point that we have separated into isolated camps with neither understanding the others role as it relates to our community. As a current leader in the police department, I will accept some of the responsibility for this degeneration.

The problem we are facing in this city as it pertains to drugs and crime is not new and we as a community have been dealing with it for decades. We continue to rely heavily on the old traditional "eyes and ears" mentality when it relates to the public's involvement in helping the police make their neighborhoods safer. This traditional involvement model didn't work twenty years ago and it won't work now.

The traditional policing approach of waiting for enough evidence to execute a search warrant or make an arrest to protect our neighborhoods didn't work twenty years ago and it won't work now.

Many citizens don't understand the limits of police power and often simplify it in their minds that because we know where a drug house is or who the drug dealers are that we should be able to shut them down and arrest them. The truth is, it's not that simple. In order to obtain a search warrant or an arrest warrant a Police officer needs probable cause. Probable cause is a higher standard than reasonable suspicion. In order to convict a person at trial we need proof beyond a reasonable doubt. Each one of these terms has its own definition and is not as simple to understand as one may think. A citizen's observation relayed to the police does not rise to the level of probable cause. It may not even rise to the level of reasonable suspicion depending on the circumstances.

Many citizens including landlords don't understand how much power they have to close drug houses and eliminate them from our neighborhoods. They actually have more power than the police in this regard however, due to a lack of knowledge they have no idea.

The person with the most power over an individual “drug house” or drug operation is the landlord not the police. Civil proof of drug activity is typically all that is needed to evict. This would require testimony of neighbors who observe this activity, the landlord who may have seen illegal substances during an inspection, and possible testimony of a police officer who may have implied knowledge or actual knowledge of drug activity at the location. The burden of proof is preponderance of the evidence, meaning that the scales tip however slightly versus proof beyond a reasonable doubt needed to convict for a criminal violation.

Landlords are YOUR first line of defense as a tenant’s lease violating behavior threatens YOUR quality of life and neighborhood livability. Landlords can intervene much earlier in the destructive cycle of neighborhood decay, therefore avoiding problems from over relying on law enforcement, which in many cases delivers a solution too late to benefit the community.

I understand that there is a lot of pressure mounting on many individuals regarding this ordinance. From members of city council, landlords, tenants, homeowners and citizens alike, I challenge each of you to accept YOUR responsibility of keeping our community strong and to protect it from further decay caused by allowing drug activities to flourish in and around our neighborhoods.

I will leave you with a final thought. Ask yourself this one question. How many times have the police been called to your residence? During a recent study of 50 rental properties, I discovered that the police were called over 370 times in a year’s time. This is an average of 7.6 per rental property. A study of 50 properties owned by homeowners revealed that the police were called just 53 times during the same time period. An average of just 1.06 per property owned by a homeowner. This is just the tip of the iceberg regarding how drug related crime and its ill effects wreak havoc on our community and waste police resources that could be better utilized protecting our taxpayers.

What is needed to solve this dilemma is many individual acts of leadership and a coordinated effort from people in differing roles who share a willingness to lead. This is the first of several announcements regarding the Landlord/tenant registration ordinance. In the releases to follow, I will put out facts not speculation or rumor and I will do so in small increments due to the volume of information involved. Hopefully this will set the record straight and help our citizens understand the importance of this ordinance in taking back our neighborhoods from those who are unwilling to conform to Williamsport’s standard of living.

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