

City files petition to close lodge

By Michael Stone

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Andrienne Kitchen's eyes fill with tears when she thinks about leaving her home for the past six years.

Kitchen lives in a neatly kept one-bedroom apartment at Superior Creek Lodge in East Ridge and works at the complex as a cleaner. She enthusiastically shows off her decorated bedroom and living room.

But the city wants to shut the lodge down, saying it's a magnet for crime and a public nuisance.

"When I first found out, I just started crying," she said. "I've been crying all day."

Kitchen said the past year has been rough on her. She was temporarily displaced when heavy rains caused the lodge to be flooded last September. The flood also killed her husband, Sylvester Kitchen. On a \$5 bet to buy beer, he tried to cross a culvert at East 14th Street while waters were high and drowned when swept away.

"I don't want to go anywhere," Kitchen said. "This is home. This is my foundation. If I have to leave, where can I begin?"

But East Ridge officials are adamant and, at a Monday meeting, discussed the upcoming attempt to shut down the lodge under an abatement of nuisance petition. The city has an extensive list of crimes committed by residents of the motel, officials said.

"This is an issue that we have been working on for over 31/2 years," East Ridge Mayor Mike Steele said Monday to roughly 100 residents. "This community has been very patient with this council during that process. I know many times I've had folks come to me and say: 'What are you doing about this situation?'"



Management at the lodge declined to comment Tuesday.

The city hasn't tried to shut down the lodge until now, city attorney John Anderson said Tuesday, because it needed to compile documentation showing the list of complaints against the lodge from police, fire and other city services.

A 300-page court document from the city, which contains mostly crime reports, was filed in Hamilton County Criminal Court Tuesday.

"Hundreds of hours have gone into preparing this case," Steele said.

The case, the State of Tennessee for the City of East Ridge v. Superior Creek Lodge, will be first heard on Monday at 9 a.m., according to the court documents.

"This day has been a long time coming for us," Eddie Phillips, East Ridge's interim city manager and public safety director, said at Monday's meeting.

From the time Superior Creek was given a business license in April 2006 through June 30, 2010, East Ridge responders received 2,654 calls for service to the lodge, city records show. East Ridge police received 2,099, the East Ridge Fire Department had 379, and 176 traffic stops were made on the property, records state.

There were 205 arrests of residents, including 31 made by agencies outside of East Ridge, during the lodge's four-year existence, documents show. Steele said Tuesday he was unaware of how many of those arrests turned into convictions.

The mayor said he realizes "90 to 95 percent" of the residents at the lodge are not responsible for the alleged crimes.

"Now I understand it's a very small percentage of the total, but it's the fact that it's been going on and on and on," Steele said.

After offering "a number of suggestions" to an "absent" owner who lives near Atlanta, Steele said the city decided to bring the case against the lodge since crime wasn't stopping.

"We feel like they are obviously allowing this to go on," he said.

Lodge owner David Gysin, who lives in Kennesaw, Ga., said "no comment" when contacted Tuesday.

Many of the crimes were reported by businesses near the lodge, the East Ridge City Council discussed Monday. Employees of several nearby businesses declined to comment Tuesday, saying they are worried about possible retaliation. At Monday's meeting, Steele specifically mentioned Holiday Inn Express Manager Neil Patel about the crime against businesses.

"I was kind of surprised at (my name being mentioned)," Patel said Tuesday. "I didn't even know that was going to happen. I was there for the budget meeting."

Patel said crimes have happened in his parking lot near the lodge, mostly vehicle break-ins, but he had made no specific complaints about its residents to city officials.

Steele said East Ridge officials plan to work with different agencies, including the American Red Cross, to find alternate housing for residents who will be displaced if the lodge is closed. He said he wasn't aware if there is housing that offers an equal rent price in East Ridge.

One of the lodge's residents, Chris Wooten, said he feels it's a couple of "bad apples" that caused the city's petition. He said he "doesn't know" where he and his family will move if it's closed.

"It'll put us in a big bind, a real big bind," he said. "We've been calling around trying to find somewhere and everything's too high (priced)."

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