

## SRHA to get bids for bedbug treatment



By Jimmy LaRoue

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The Suffolk Redevelopment and Housing Authority's board of commissioners voted Tuesday to solicit bids on having the entire Chorey Park Apartments building heat and chemical treated for bedbugs.

The move followed a report from Housing Operations Director Michell Layne that detailed for commissioners the scope of the bedbug problem at Chorey Park over the last year.

Layne told commissioners that prior to July 2018, there had been isolated incidents of "one or two issues" but said that's when there was an upswing in bedbugs at Chorey Park.

At that time, she said the property manager reached out to the Norfolk Redevelopment and Housing Authority to look into how to handle the problem "because others in the area were having the same issue," she said.

The Norfolk authority recommended that SRHA do heat treatment, and Layne said she looked into purchasing a heat machine to treat the bedbugs. She said two units will be treated with heat Thursday, noting it takes about five hours for the treatment to work. For three other units with bedbugs, she said those would be scheduled for next week, saying they want to give time for SRHA staff to learn how to use the machine with the heat and propane tanks involved.

Layne said Suffolk Pest Control came out to chemically treat seven apartments in September 2018, and there were just three apartments with a bedbug problem in November, and five units were treated for bedbugs the following month.

However, at a January inspection of all 100 apartments at Chorey Park, 35 showed signs of bedbugs. Of those, she said four had been treated, leaving 31 more to be treated. Layne said the authority also received a report on Jan. 19 of bedbug activity in the laundry room. Suffolk Pest Control inspected and treated the laundry room, closing it for a couple of days — running the washers and cleaning out the vents to make sure there were no signs of infestation.

After the 35 apartments had been treated, Layne said there was just one apartment with a bedbug issue in March, but the number has bounced up and down through June, when there were six apartments that had bedbugs. Layne said that after a door-to-door survey of all residents earlier this month, 16 residents suspected they had bedbugs, but after inspecting them, they found five that had them — either dead or alive.

Commissioner Regina Hall said residents had invited her to Chorey Park over the past several months to see the problem first hand and take photos. She said she has found living and dead bedbugs during her visits to the apartment building.

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“Unfortunately, my brother is a resident in Chorey Park,” Hall said, referring to Donte’ Hall. “And my family had to throw away all of his belongings because his apartment was affected with bedbugs. ... It is a factor in the community.”

Commissioner Jeffrey Robertson asked Hall how many apartments were infested.

“That whole building has been infested,” Hall said.

Robertson then asked her how many residents had been bitten by bedbugs.

“All of them,” Hall said. “Even in my brother’s bed. I have pictures. I’m stating facts. And if I’m a voice for my residents, I’m being a voice tonight.”

Hall said she encourages residents to speak with SRHA staff about the problem, but they are distrustful.

“When they receive letters like this ... they feel intimidated when they complain because if they didn’t bring the bedbugs in, and if they are already the population that is elderly, disabled, handicapped, or (have) a mental defect, and they read this letter, they’re already scared,” Hall said, and added that “they feel like, if they complain, they’re going to get evicted from the property, so they don’t complain.”

Hall noted the first sentence of the letter that goes out to residents states they are “in violation of your lease agreement.”

SRHA executive director Tracey Snipes said all residents were given those letters of notification about the problem, but commissioners took issue with the language used in them, and Layne said those could be worded differently.

“I will certainly talk to the property manager about the wording of the letter,” Layne said.

Snipes said that would have to be changed “across the board” because such forms are generally standardized, but noted that some apartments had been treated between five and seven times and said they “wanted there to be a letter that got people’s attention.”

Board Vice Chairman Quinton Franklin said it doesn’t matter how the bedbugs got to Chorey Park, and said the language in the letter “has got to go.”

“This is a public relations nightmare,” Franklin said. “This is a nightmare as far as our residents are concerned. Fix the problem. And however you’ve got to fix the problem, bring us the resolution, how we can resolve it, and let’s get it done.”

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Commissioner Deborah Hudson said SRHA needs to provide help for residents, and telling them that they need to do all the work to prepare their apartments for treatment is overwhelming them.

“Sending out this notice and not explaining it,” Hudson said, “it just makes the problem worse, and it does incite fear and it does cause them not to want to report (bedbugs).”