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CLASSIFIEDS

Baptists use fire watch to keep complex open

By Sarah Bruyn Jones
Staff Writer
January 13, 2006 3:15AM

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TUSCALOOSA| Richard Stewart sat on the 11th floor of Clara Verner Tower reading his Bible while he kept watch over the floor Thursday morning.

Seven floors below, Stewart's wife, Patsy, wished residents "good morning" while flipping through the pages of Ladies Home Journal magazine.

Every 15 to 20 minutes, the Stewarts walk the halls of their assigned floors, checking for fire hazards and sniffing for smoke.

They are part of about 200 fire watch volunteers from local Southern Baptist congregations who have stepped forward to help keep the 13-story senior citizen apartment building open until a sprinkler system is installed.

"If you were in a bad situation you'd want someone to step in and help you," said Stewart, a member of Taylorville Baptist Church.

Facing the possibility that the 200 or so residents would have to move out of the building, owned by Alabama Baptist Retirement Centers, the Baptist

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Holt Baptist Church member Trice Ayers patrols the hallway for fire hazards at Clara Verner Tower Thursday.
TuscaloosaNews.com | Carmen Sisson

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A building with more than four stories is required to have a sprinkler system. Clara Verner Tower is the only building in Tuscaloosa not meeting the code. The volunteer fire watch is a temporary solution until the sprinkler system is ready.

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congregations underwent training from the fire marshal in early December.

"We explained to them what fire watch is and why it's necessary; what we want them to do in an emergency, who to call, and how to use fire extinguishers," said Ed Paulk, assistant state fire marshal.

Of the 86 churches that belong to the Tuscaloosa Baptist Association, about 32 have stepped forward to lend a hand. Volunteers rotate in and out of the building every two or four hours between 8 a.m. and 10 p.m. During the evenings residents have been hired to maintain the fire patrol.

The Alabama Baptist Retirement Centers is in the process of finalizing its plans to install a sprinkler system to meet fire code regulations. An anonymous donor has offered to contribute an undisclosed amount to help cover the cost of the sprinkler system. The volunteer fire watch was established as a temporary fix.

Work to install the sprinkler system is expected to begin in the next 35 to 45 days, and it would take about 90 days to complete.

The volunteer shifts are scheduled through the end of the month, but Jerry Wilkins, president of the Tuscaloosa Baptist Association, said if needed they would figure out a way to continue supplying volunteers as long as they are needed.

"Even when work starts we will still have to have the fire watch," Paulk said. "But as work progresses and circumstances permit, the program will be adjusted to meet the needs until they become compliant."

To date there have been no incidences were the fire watch volunteers had to put their training to use, said Mindy McCracker, a manager at Clara Verner Tower.

The human fire watch system, however, isn't perfect. There are times when volunteers are sick or timeslots aren't filled.

Wilkins estimates that volunteers are there between 80 and 90 percent of the time. Wednesday nights, when many Baptist congregations have services or Bible study, have been particularly difficult to keep staffed, Wilkins said. Filling timeslots on Friday evenings have also been a struggle.

For Tommy Williams, who has been guarding the eighth and ninth floors every Thursday morning it's something he said he'll keep doing as long as he's needed.

"It's like anything else, a disaster or anything, when people are in need, other people show up," he said. "It doesn't matter if it's time or money, people are there."

For Gerald H. Clanton, who has lived at Clara Verner Tower for two years, that's good news.

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"It means a lot to know we have help from the outside. We appreciate them doing it," Clanton said. "They're real friendly, real helpful and it's just been nice to see them."

Staff Writer Lydia Seabol contributed to this report.

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