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Article published Nov 21, 2005

## **Fire causes evacuation of seniors**

By Katie Porterfield  
Staff Writer

**TUSCALOOSA** | An eighth-floor apartment at Clara Verner Tower on Hackberry Lane was severely damaged in a fire Sunday evening that sent two individuals to DCH Regional Medical Center and caused seven others to be treated on the scene.

Lt. Travis Parker, spokesperson for the Tuscaloosa Fire and Rescue Service, said those treated on the scene had existing medical conditions that were aggravated by the fire. The individuals transported to DCH were having trouble breathing and experiencing chest pains.

Parker said fire fighters evacuated as many residents as possible from the senior living facility on the eighth floor and above. If residents could not physically evacuate, firefighters secured them in their apartments to protect them from the smoke.

Parker said seven engine companies, two ladder companies, two rescue companies, the support battalion chief and other support personnel responded to the fire. The fire was called in at 6:15 p.m.

The cause of the fire is under investigation.

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Article published Dec 10, 2005

## **Lack of sprinklers may close Clara Verner Tower Group may not have money for new sprinklers for apartment building**

By Antwanette Jones  
Staff Writer

TUSCALOOSA | Ted Leonard stood in the hallway of Clara Verner Tower on Friday afternoon, concerned that his home for the past decade could close.

"For 10 years this has been my home," Leonard said. "I'm very comfortable and secure here."

But Clara Verner, a 13-story apartment building near the University of Alabama that has been hit with four fires this year, does not have a sprinkler system, a violation of the state fire code.

Residents, family members and employees of the retirement center met Friday with William Austin, president of the Montgomery-based Alabama Baptist Retirement Centers, which manages the apartment building, to discuss the fate of the facility and the issue of funding for a sprinkler system.

ABRC has until Jan. 3 to submit a written plan to the state fire marshal outlining how it plans to address the lack of a sprinkler system. Austin said ABRC does not have the money for a new sprinkler system and the facility could close down.

The most recent bid for installing a sprinkler system was \$865,000.

The city a few years ago offered up a \$287,000 block grant to help ABRC buy the sprinkler system. Austin said that was only a portion of what the organization needed.

He said ABRC "has not seen a dime of the money" from the block grant. The city has said that ABRC will have to come up with the remainder of the funds needed for a new sprinkler system before releasing the grant funds.

Tuscaloosa Fire and Rescue Chief Alan Martin said ABRC has had ample time to bring the apartment building up to code.

"This is not something that has just snuck up on them -- it has been an ongoing situation," Martin said.

After the city in 1999 adopted new fire safety standards set by the state, Tuscaloosa officials in 2000 found that five area buildings, including Clara Verner Tower, did not meet the new fire code set by the state. A five-year time limit was set to bring the buildings up to code, a deadline met by all but Clara Verner Tower.

Austin says that ABRC has been aggressively pursuing funding to bring the apartment building up to code, but has been unsuccessful.

"When I say Clara Verner Tower is a not-for-profit entity, we really are not for profit. We don't make anything," Austin said before a group of mostly disgruntled residents.

Austin said the ABRC has already tried different routes to get the funds, going from the regional U.S. Housing and Urban Development office in Birmingham and the national office in Washington, D.C., to state Sen. Richard Shelby.

Sarah Bruyn Jones contributed to this report. Reach Antwanette Jones at [antwanette.jones@tuscaloosanews.com](mailto:antwanette.jones@tuscaloosanews.com) or (205) 722-0207.

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Article published Dec 15, 2005

## **Officials should be ashamed to evict**

Thomas Craig  
Tuscaloosa

Dear Editor: Recent events at Clara Verner Towers cast a shadow of shame on the city of Tuscaloosa. Residents of this unique community are being forced into the cold at Christmas time.

State fire marshals, city officials and the owners of Clara Verner Towers should be ashamed of their decision to close this facility.

Granted, there may be some deficiencies in the building due to age. However, in the 10-plus years my mother-in-law has lived there, the overall safety record for this group of senior citizens is outstanding. The residents of Clara Verner Towers are bonded into their own tight-knit community within a community. They share friendship, love, and caring for one another that should be hailed as an example of human dignity the rest of Tuscaloosa should aspire too.

Residents of Clara Verner Towers were told the building will close on Jan. 3, which is less than three weeks away. So, during the holiday season the community of Clara Verner Towers residents will cease to exist. Deadbeat tenants are given 90 days to find a new place to live. Our government officials along with the owners of Clara Verner Towers have mandated these elderly long-term citizens of Tuscaloosa clear out.

I pose this question to those state, city and business leaders:

How many of the community of Clara Verner Towers will die not from fire, but from the loss of their Clara Verner Towers family and the stress of being thrown out in the cold?

Shame on you!

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Article published Dec 19, 2005

## **Clara Verner residents not ready to give up home Company that manages building trying to solve problem**

By Lydia Seabol  
Staff Writer

TUSCALOOSA | Cooking four turkeys, several side dishes and a dozen desserts the week before Christmas isn't unusual for Barbara McReynolds.

It's something the 59-year-old has been doing for the past five years.

She's passionate about cooking for what she calls a family.

It's her adopted one -- fellow residents at Clara Verner Tower, who, like her, aren't celebrating the holiday with any other loved ones.

Every Christmas Day, she wheels the food into the Clara Verner's recreation room, with its long rows of tables and chairs, its stockings pinned up on the peach colored walls and the ceramic manger scene that sits on the piano. Many residents look forward to the annual dinner. But for those who can't make it out of their apartments, McReynolds takes carts of plates up to their rooms.

For her, Clara Verner is home, but it's a home she may be forced to leave.

No money, plenty of worry

On Dec. 9, administrators of the 13-story senior citizen apartment building told residents that the building could close because it doesn't meet the fire code. Alabama Baptist Retirement Centers, which manages the building, needs \$867,000 to install a sprinkler system -- money officials with the non-profit organization say will be hard to come up with.

McReynolds, like most of the residents, is worried.

"I wonder what will happen to these people," McReynolds said, motioning to a group of residents who congregated by the elevator Friday, some of them in wheelchairs.

"Some are so frail they wouldn't have a chance. We all look out over each other, but if it closed no one would have anyone."

Carolyn Brock, 83, has called Tuscaloosa her home for three decades, and has spent nearly half that time in Clara Verner. Tuscaloosa is where her friends are, where her church is, and where her husband is buried.

"I don't know what in the world I would do if I had to leave," Brock said. "I don't know where else I would go. I love it here, I really do."

Manuel Dillard, 67, says he feels the same. He has liked living at Clara Verner so much that he's lived there twice, first from 1997 to 1999 and now for the past year. One of the things that attracted him to the complex was the rent -- which is based on each individual's income. Some tenants pay as little as \$50 a month for rent, while others pay upward of \$300, including utilities.

"It was something I could afford, and that was one of the things that brought me back here," Dillard said. "There's just not a lot of places around for people with low income to live."

If the complex is forced to close, he is worried about where he and his wife would go.

"Short term, we would have a place to go, but long term would be a problem," Dillard said. "Some of [the tenants] are very disturbed about it because they would have no place to go."

Sarah Nixon, 74, has lived at the tower for three years, but she spent 13 years working in administration before she moved in as a resident. Her days at Clara Verner are filled with dominoes and card games, visiting with friends and sing-alongs.

"I've made a lot of friends here, and I've also lost a lot," Nixon said. "But I love to live here, I feel safe and secure here. We just have a good time."

While she said she has a place to go to if she has to move, others aren't so lucky.

"I am lucky, and I have a family," she said. "But some of them don't have a family, and some of them are in their 90s. They would have a hard time."

#### Fire monitors

Closing Clara Verner is the last thing William Austin, president of the ABRC, wants to do.

He's making every effort possible to meet the fire code, including working with HUD to develop a viable plan on how they will afford a sprinkler unit.

A few years ago, the city offered a \$287,000 block grant to help buy the sprinkler system, but ABRC would first have to come up with the rest of the money before the grant would be released.

For now, Austin is trying to work with the state fire marshal to find a temporary solution. This past week he put fire watch monitors in place -- people who roam the floors to watch for fire hazards and help evacuate residents in case of an emergency.

There will be three shifts of six monitors, two for each floor. The two shifts will consist of volunteers from local churches, but ABRC will have to hire monitors for the night shift.

While Austin admits that the building needs to be up to code, a code the city adopted in 1999, in the last 30 years there have been small kitchen fires but never a large fire that caused any major injuries -- until Nov. 20.

On that day a fire on the eighth floor caused major damage to one apartment unit and caused two residents to be taken to DCH Regional Medical Center.

Almost a month later, the smoke stains still streak across the walls and ceiling and around the air vents on the floors above.

A plan?

By Jan. 3, Austin is required to present a written plan to the state fire marshal outlining how sprinklers will be paid for and when they should be installed. The deadline does not mean that he has to have the sprinklers installed.

"All the [fire monitors] do is gets us to Jan. 3, I still have to have a written plan," Austin said. "But that does not mean I have to have the money in my hand, just a logical and provable plan, which I'm working feverishly to get."

Unless there is some kind of outside donation or grant, Austin said it was going to be difficult to come up with the money. If the tower is forced to close, the ABRC will work to ensure that the 200 or so residents have somewhere to go.

"We will aggressively try to find housing for them in every way," Austin said. "Should worse come to worse, we are not going to let them be put out on the street. That's the furthest thing on our mind."

But it is something that is on the minds of the residents.

"There is a lot of anger over here now, because the fear has turned to anger," said 72-year-old Peggy Jackson. "They are hearing the doors are going to be locked on Jan. 3 and their suitcases on the stoop, but they have not heard that he just has to have a plan on Jan. 3."

In the meantime, Jackson isn't worried about where she will go if the building closes, because she said that it's all in God's plan.

"I have faith that some things happen for a reason," she said. "This may be a call for children to take care of their family a little better."

She said that, rather than being worried or angry, she'd rather spend her energy on other things in her life.

"I grew up in a home that says when you give it to God, you don't take it back: Let Him handle it," Jackson said. "If I have to move, then I have to move, and it could be better than what I've got now. Who knows?"

Reach Lydia Seabol at [lydia.seabol@tuscaloosaneews.com](mailto:lydia.seabol@tuscaloosaneews.com) or (205) 722-0222.

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Article published Dec 23, 2005

## **Clara Verner residents can call FEMA**

Joe T. Bell  
Tuscaloosa

Dear Editor: The Clara Verner residents should not really worry if they are evicted. All they have to do is call FEMA and tell them they are homeless and they will be provided with a plush hotel or motel room. Maybe free meals delivered, medical care and transportation. All for free! They would be evictees rather than evacuees.



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Article published Dec 27, 2005

## **Letter was ridiculous, absurd**

Katriesa Crummie  
Tuscaloosa

Dear Editor: When I read the letter entitled "Clara Verna Residents Can Call FEMA," I knew I had to respond. I am a student at the University of Alabama who, like everyone else in the country, watched with disbelief as the Gulf Coast was dealt a horrible blow by Hurricane Katrina.

I volunteered at the Red Cross shelter at the recreation center on campus and saw and heard firsthand the devastation the hurricane brought to people.

For the ignorant author of that letter to suggest that those people are getting a "free ride" is absolutely ridiculous and absurd, especially at this time of the year.

I would encourage Joe T. Bell to not seek the aid of FEMA or any other charity should he become the unfortunate victim of a violent tornado or flood, as those forces of nature are prominent in Tuscaloosa County. Also, the retirement community is named the Clara Verner, not Verna, Towers.

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Article published Dec 27, 2005

## **Sad day for Baptists in Alabama**

James H. Robertson  
Chattanooga, Tenn.

Dear Editor: On Dec. 9, my wife and I were in Tuscaloosa to visit my mother and sister, who live at Clara Verner Tower. We were asked to attend a meeting with Mr. William Austin.

He proceeded to inform the residents that as of Jan. 1, 2006, the building would be condemned if \$865,000 was not raised to install a sprinkler system. This is not news to Mr. Austin; he has known this for five years. Years ago, the city of Tuscaloosa offered a block grant of \$287,000 to help with the cost.

Mr. Austin has not done his job. His words are, "The Alabama Baptist Association who owns the building does not have the funds to do this."

I am sorry, Mr. Austin. I do not believe you. The question is not, "Does the Alabama Baptist Association have the resources to install the sprinkler system?" The question is, "Will the Alabama Baptist Association use their resources to install the sprinkler system?"

If the Alabama Baptist Association chooses not to install the sprinkler system and turns their backs on the elderly, sick and afflicted, who may have supported the Baptists all of their lives with their prayers, money and attendance in church, then it is a sad day for Baptists everywhere, especially in the state of Alabama.

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Article published Dec 29, 2005

## **No place like home**

### **Seniors relieved that sprinkler installation plan will allow them to remain in Clara Verner Tower**

By Lydia Seabol  
Staff Writer

TUSCALOOSA | After living at Clara Verner Tower for 14 years, 83-year-old Carolyn Brock didn't want to move.

The senior citizen apartment building had become home to her. But like many of the 200 or so residents, she wondered where she would go after being notified earlier this month that the building might be closed for not meeting fire codes because it did not have a sprinkler system.

"I don't know what in the world I would do if I had to leave," Brock said. "I don't know where else I would go. I love it here, I really do."

But the worrying ended Wednesday, as news spread quickly among Clara Verner residents that the building was not going to close after all.

"One of the officials from the fire department told us that we don't have to worry about it anymore," Brock said. "I am just thrilled, I tell you."

William Austin, president of the Alabama Baptist Retirement Centers, presented a plan to the state fire marshal Tuesday that included installation and proposed funding for a sprinkler system. Austin said the funding came from a person he would not identify.

"We are going to continue as we are with all the safety issues cured and dealt with," Austin said. "I can't elaborate on the funding at this point, because we don't have the money in our hand. But there has been an agreement reached and a person is helping us."

Installation of the sprinklers could begin as soon as the master plan is signed, said Austin. It would take about 90 days to complete.

The state fire marshal had given ABRC, which manages the building, until Jan. 3 to present a plan for installing a sprinkler system. It was something that the ABRC had been working on since 1999, when the city passed a code requiring buildings taller than eight stories to have sprinklers.

But ABRC, a nonprofit organization, had trouble coming up with the estimated \$867,000 for the sprinklers. A few years ago the city had offered a \$287,000 block grant to help buy sprinklers, but the ABRC first had to come up with the rest of the money before the grant would be released.

Austin did not say if ABRC will use the block grant for the sprinklers, but did say that he expects the project to cost less than the original estimate.

If the building had closed, it could have been a problem for many of the residents. That's because there is a shortage of affordable housing for senior citizens in Tuscaloosa, said Cynthia Burton, executive director of Community Services Programs of West Alabama.

Residents at senior apartment complexes such as Clara Verner Tower, Presbyterian Apartments and the CSP village pay a low rent that is determined by their income. At Clara Verner, rent ranges from \$50 a month to more than \$350, Austin said.

Presbyterian Apartments has a long waiting list, and it often takes three to six months to get a unit. CSP Village also is full. While the Tuscaloosa Housing Authority has 102 apartments for the elderly at Robinson Tower, there is no vacancy there either, or in any of the other public housing developments.

"We don't have any vacancy at all. Zero," said Willie J. Fort, assistant executive director for the Tuscaloosa Housing Authority. "The longest waiting list we have is for one-bedroom units. I don't know where [senior citizens] are going because we just don't have any vacancy."

The Northport Housing Authority, which does not have a senior citizen building, is also full.

Clara Verner resident Peggy Jackson, 72, said she isn't worried about moving.

"I'm packing, but I'm just packing up my Christmas stuff," she said.

Reach Lydia Seabol at [lydia.seabol@tuscaloosaneews.com](mailto:lydia.seabol@tuscaloosaneews.com) or (205) 722-0222.

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Article published Dec 30, 2005

## **Clara Verner Tower Plans On Installing New Fire Sprinklers**

by Tom Huggins

For 30 years, The Clara Verner Tower has provided a home for senior citizens here in West Alabama.

Over the last few weeks, however, there has been great amount of uncertainty.

Last month, the State Fire Marshal gave building managers a deadline of January 3 to make plans for a fire sprinkler system on all floors, at a cost of around \$900,000.

If not, more than 200 residents will be forced to vacate.

Verner resident Peggy Jackson says "Some of them (residents) had legitimate reasons for being upset because some of them don't have families to go to. Others have families to go to, but they're out of town and they don't want to leave Tuscaloosa."

Now, they may not have to.

According to published reports, the State Fire Marshal received a proposal from the owner of Clara Verner that includes funding to install the sprinklers.

Although it hasn't been approved yet, for Clara Verner residents, word of the new development has been very welcome news.

Resident Billie Schloesser says "It's one of those things where everybody was up in the air. 80 percent probably had no idea where they were going to have to go and move."

Resident Elise Morris feared "I was really afraid we were going to have leave our homes, which would have been real sad because we are one big, happy family."

Ms. Jackson agrees. "I love it here; I chose here. It wasn't a place somebody put me in, I chose to come here," Jackson says.

If that funding proposal is approved by the State Fire Marshal, owners of the Clara Verner Tower expect the sprinkler system to be completely installed within ninety days.

In the video, WVUA News Reporter Jason Johnson has the story.

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Article published Dec 30, 2005

## Christmas comes to Clara Verner Tower

Christmas was late in coming to the elderly residents of Clara Verner Tower, a high-rise apartment at the foot of Hackberry Lane in Tuscaloosa.

But the belated gift -- apparently from an anonymous donor -- brought nothing but joy.

An unidentified individual has agreed to provide the funding needed to install a sprinkler system in the building. Without it, the complex would have been forced to close and many of its 200 or so senior residents would be in search of a new home.

Earlier this month, residents were told that the lack of a sprinkler system meant that the building did not meet fire codes. A state fire marshal gave Alabama Baptist Retirement Centers, which manages the building, until Jan. 3 to come up with a viable plan for installing the sprinklers.

ABRC, a nonprofit, had trouble raising the money for the sprinklers, which was estimated at \$867,000. On Tuesday, however, the group presented a plan to the fire marshal that included money from a donor whom ABRC would not identify.

We hope the plan is quickly implemented. It would be unconscionable to turn the elderly residents out of the apartments, where they may have lived for years.

What would have been much worse, however, is if the lack of a sprinkler system had resulted in a fatal fire.

Although officials have been aware of the deficiency since 1999, when the city passed a code requiring buildings taller than eight stories to have sprinkler systems, nothing was done to force the issue at Clara Verner Tower until a Nov. 20 blaze on the eighth floor. Two residents were taken to the hospital and there was major damage to an apartment.

We're glad that a safety upgrade is in the offing. But this is an issue that should have been resolved long before now.