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Crestwood Place, an apartment complex near the Seattle-Tukwila border, is a neighborhood where police have noted drug and gang issues. The Mount Baker Housing Authority recently purchased the property and is currently renovating both inside and out, and adding a security gate. Efforts have earned praise from police. (Clifford DesPeaux / seattlepi.com)

Troubled apartments shine anew

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Many of the brown kitchen cabinets wouldn't close anymore. Once-white appliances showed discoloration that couldn't be scrubbed from decades of use and some neglectful tenants.

Outside the Creston Park Apartments, the sticker bushes and ivy showed where managers' good intentions were lost to lack of time and money. That one wobbly concrete step to the third floor showed it, too.

Police say those had been the least of the problems facing the complex at 10500 51st Ave. S. They'd seen drug deals in the parking lot. Gang members had wandered over.

Though the neighborhood isn't free from problems, police from the South Precinct say ones that plagued the complex grounds for years have been disappearing -- quickly.

Capt. Les Liggins said a turning point came when the apartments' new owners came to him with a simple message: How can we work together to solve this years-long problem?

In February, the Mt. Baker Housing Authority bought the 26-unit complex for nearly \$1.7 million. Their goal is to get more good low- and moderate-income tenants, particularly families.

"We want apartments that are cheaper than the market rate and better than the average quality standard," executive director Mike Rooney said. "We're don't want people who have lived here 30 years to have to move down to Skyway or Renton."

"It's in everybody's best interest."

Late last month, crews pulled ivy and sticker bushes outside the complex. Security cameras were installed last week. The 6-foot wrought iron controlled-access fence is scheduled to be completed this week.

New appliances, floors, cabinets and fixtures are on the list of things replaced in the units. An on-site property manager looks after the 15 units already occupied.

The complex has been renamed Crestwood Place.

The mostly two-bedroom units rent for \$795 a month, and tenants get a month break when they signed a year-long lease, Rooney said.

The effort has taken considerable money -- between \$725,000 and \$750,000 he estimates. But police say the financial investment isn't the only thing that has helped the neighborhood. Communication also is key.

"We really can't thank them enough for addressing this problem and reaching out to us," Liggins said. "They have the ability and the desire to involve the police and the community."

Solomon Woldai, who has lived two blocks from the apartments since 2002, has seen problem people in the neighborhood before. Because he's concerned about his young daughters and son waiting for a school bus nearby, he and his wife give them rides to school.

"Each year we wait and see," he said of neighborhood problems. "Some years it was terrible; some years it was OK.

"We hope this is going to be a good summer."

The previous apartment owner had the vision, but not the money to make it happen, housing association staff said. Police say previous property managers weren't as caring.

Police boundaries also add to the confusion, some neighbors say.

If there's a disturbance at the apartment complex, Seattle police respond. But the mini mart across the street -- where last week young men loitered, pushing bootleg movies -- is in Tukwila. A few blocks south is unincorporated King County, an area patrolled by Sheriff's deputies.

"If we saw a crime happening in that apartment complex, we would definitely react to it," Tukwila police spokesman Mike Murphy said. "But we wouldn't routinely patrol the complex."

Liggins said Seattle police don't patrol Tukwila, but can address a crime they see happen there or follow suspects across the street.

"Now we have a multiagency gang task force that's good for [gang issues](#)," Murphy said, adding agencies

would like more involvement with neighbors. "But it'd be nice if that neighborhood has a coordinated law enforcement approach."

The effort by the Mt. Baker Housing Authority -- an organization that has revitalized other properties, including the [Starliter Apartments](#) and the [Mt. Baker Village Apartments](#) -- is on the right track, Liggins said.

"We're not here to flip the property -- we want to be here for years," Rooney said. "We really want people actively managing the building.

"On a daily basis, we want people to see change for the good."

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