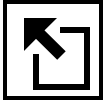


NEWS > HOUSING

City of Renting: The challenges of owners and tenants in Reading



Reading Eagle: Ben Hasty

Nigel Walker, who previously owned a house in the Centre Park Historic District and is standing on the 300 block of Douglass Street, now rents a few blocks away and says she sees a difference in the pride people take in the two neighborhoods.



By **ADAM RICHTER** | arichter@readingeagle.com | Reading Eagle

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When Nigel Walker moved to Reading as a college student, she was attracted by the cheap rent: \$150 for an efficiency apartment.

That was 1994.

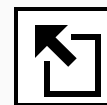
Walker no longer lives in the efficiency but she has lived in the city as a renter, a homeowner and now a renter again. She and her boyfriend, who later became her husband, moved into a huge apartment in the Centre Park Historic District.

“We felt ownership,” Walker said. “Even though we were renting, we felt part of the neighborhood.”

Walker and her then-husband bought a house in Centre Park. Today, though, she is back to renting.

This puts her in the sizable majority of Reading residents. Just over 40 percent of the city’s occupied homes are owner-occupied, meaning nearly 60 percent of Reading’s housing stock is rented.

You don’t need to be a homeowner to care about and feel invested in your neighborhood. But the city’s high number of rental properties means fewer people are putting down long-term roots.



In Reading neighborhoods

Joan DeBlasi lives in the 1300 block of Muhlenberg Street in the city’s southeast section. She owns two houses on the block: the one she lives in, and the one she rents – and is now trying to sell. A longtime tenant who recently moved out caused her so much stress that DeBlasi said she developed health problems.

The 1300 block of Muhlenberg Street has roughly the same number of owner-occupied and renter-occupied homes. At least two homes are vacant. One of those is next door to DeBlasi, who worries the next owner might rent it out to a tenant who doesn’t care about the neighbors. She already sees a

DeBlasi places the blame for bad rentals on landlords who don't care about property upkeep and a city government that she says doesn't do enough to crack down on them.

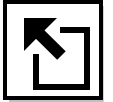
"The city needs to monitor these out-of-town landlords," she said.

DeBlasi lives in a small row home on the block, but it's big enough, and inexpensive enough, for her to live comfortably. She has lived in Philadelphia, Bethlehem and other parts of Reading, and wants to stay in the neighborhood where she's lived for the last 20 years.

"I can live here respectfully at my age," DeBlasi said, though she declined to say what that age is.

Vicki Scheetz lives in a rented home on Buttonwood Street with her wife, daughter and three grandchildren. She said the neighborhood is safe, aside from the occasional car accident.

Scheetz said Reading officials don't do enough to crack down on code violations, pointing out that a strip of greenspace next to her house had weeds almost as tall as the bush in the same space. She's been told by her landlord that it wasn't their problem, so Scheetz doesn't touch it. The weeds have since been cut back.



Evictions and housing

Tim Daley, executive director of Habitat for Humanity's Berks County chapter, said he recognizes that homeownership alone won't improve Reading's neighborhoods, but it's a start.

Daley said landlords need to invest in their buildings and attract renters who want to live there. When you have unstable living situations, he said, you have unstable neighborhoods.

One cause of that instability is evictions. According to Eviction Lab data, Reading had the highest eviction rate among Pennsylvania's large and mid-sized cities in 2016 – and was second only to Philadelphia when it comes to total evictions.

According to data from the Eviction Lab, Reading experienced 1,142

“Eviction tears at the fabric of the community,” said Lavar Edmonds, an Eviction Lab researcher.

Once you’re evicted, Edmonds said, odds are you’re going to move into lower-quality housing because of the effect an eviction has on your credit history.

The move isn’t always the worst part.

Evictions, Edmonds said, can prolong depression in people who’ve gone through it. The nonprofit is starting to study the psychological effects such a destabilizing event can have on children as well as their parents.

“It trickles down throughout the entire household,” he said.

Many times, landlords have their attorneys present at eviction proceedings. Tenants rarely do, said Edmonds, which gives the owner a tremendous advantage.

“The legal power rests in the hands of the landlord,” he said.

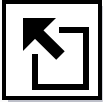
Importance of good housing

Housing – owner-occupied or not – needs to be clean, safe and affordable, Daley said, in order for children to have a better chance at a good education, future employment prospects and a healthy life.

Habitat, which works with first-time homebuyers, helps make the purchase affordable in part by requiring 300 hours of “sweat equity,” including financial education, from its clients. Once they’re in a house, Habitat families pay less on a mortgage than they did in rent, Daley said.

Habitat has been partnering with Neighborhood Housing Services on its latest project, a home in what’s been designated as the Buttonwood Gateway, a neighborhood that includes West Buttonwood Street, which connects to West Reading.

Daley is optimistic the neighborhood renovations going on there will put Reading’s housing stock in a better light.



When Walker and her husband bought a house, they bought a three-story, six-bedroom home in the neighborhood. It was cheap enough that Walker could be a stay-at-home mom.

They had misgivings about the school district, so they sent the child to private school when he was little. Walker didn't like that, and eventually enrolled him in public school. Her son is now a student at the Reading Intermediate High School and does really well there, Walker said.

She liked how much neighbors took care of their block, and Walker became involved with the Centre Park Historic District, eventually joining – and running – its board.

Now divorced, Walker rents a home on Thorn Street, just a few blocks from the district.

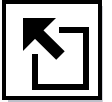
Walker said the difference between her old neighborhood and new is visible in the trash she sees in the sidewalks every day.

“If you have an area that's clean, people will keep it clean,” Walker said.

But if an area is dirty, she said people just don't seem to care.

Walker has tried talking to some of her neighbors, to encourage them to take better care of the block. But they've told her they think it's the city's job.

“I don't know where the mentality comes from,” Walker said, “but it's really frustrating.”



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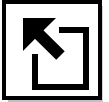
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Saturday, August 15



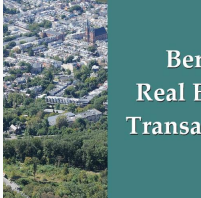
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Friday, August 21



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Friday, August 21



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Sunday, August 23



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Saturday, August 22



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Friday, August 21



Fun along the river in Muhlenberg Township [photos]

Saturday, August 22

