

**Ensuring Housing Quality: Proactive Minimum Housing Code Inspections
of Rental Properties in North Carolina Cities**

by

Carol Cooley Hickey

A paper submitted to the faculty of
The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree
Master of Public Administration

April 4, 2008

Executive Summary

In response to increasing concerns about the prevalence of substandard rental properties, five cities in North Carolina—Greensboro, Asheville, Statesville, Morganton, and Reidsville—have adopted ordinances making it illegal for landlords to lease housing units that do not have valid certifications from the cities that the units meet minimum housing codes. These cities are certifying code compliance through proactive inspections of all rental properties in their jurisdictions. This capstone paper examines how these rental inspections programs function and what returns on investments they provide, focusing on program purposes, formats, costs, measures of effectiveness, and considerations for implementation. Through stronger legal incentives and more inspections, the cities aim to prevent and correct housing deterioration and unsafe living conditions. Indicating successful outcomes, data show relationships between proactive rental inspections programs and decreases in housing complaints and residential fires. As cities implement these programs, performance measures help program staff evaluate effectiveness and sustain political and community support.

The attached paper represents work done by a UNC Chapel Hill Master of Public Administration student as a class project. It is not a formal report of the Institute of Government, nor is it the work of School of Government faculty.

The Problem of Substandard Housing. Deteriorated or substandard housing negatively impacts the public health, economic viability, and safety of communities:

- A 2007 report by the North Carolina Housing Coalition found that North Carolina spent \$95 million in 2006 on childhood illnesses and injuries attributable to living in substandard housing.¹
- In a study of the New York City area, researchers found that “property values were *one third higher* for properties not located in run-down neighborhoods,” even when accounting for other factors.²
- The *broken windows theory* provides evidence that deteriorated housing, or “untended property,” sends messages that “no one cares” and crime is acceptable in a neighborhood.³

To address the problem of deteriorated housing, most mid- to large-size cities have adopted minimum housing codes that establish minimum standards for safety, sanitation, and human habitation.⁴ To enforce these codes, most cities conduct inspections in response to citizen complaints. Some cities are finding that rental properties compose the majority of housing units in violation of municipal minimum housing standards. In 2003, the city of Greensboro, for example, found that of 1,042 housing units known to be in active violation of its housing code, 798, or 77 percent, were rental properties.⁵

Proactive Rental Property Inspections Programs as Potential Solutions. In response to increasing concerns about the prevalence of substandard rental properties, some cities in North Carolina, including Greensboro, Statesville, Morganton, and Reidsville, have adopted ordinances making it illegal for landlords to lease housing units that do not have valid certifications from the cities that the units meet minimum housing codes.⁶ To certify code compliance, these cities are conducting proactive inspections of all rental properties in their jurisdictions and issuing escalating fines for noncompliance.⁷ Asheville had a similar ordinance and inspections program from 1994 to 2003 but has since returned to complaint-based enforcement.⁸ In contrast to inspections that respond to complaints, the phrase “proactive inspections” describes city-initiated, periodic inspections of all rental properties. For each city, “inspections program” refers to proactive rental property inspections, certification requirements, and sanctions established by the city’s rental property ordinance, and as applicable, the sanction of withholding access to utility services.

Capstone Purpose and Research Questions. This capstone paper examines proactive rental inspections programs as a means of enforcing landlord compliance with requirements that leased housing units meet minimum housing standards, drawing on data and program information from Greensboro, Asheville, Statesville, Morganton, and Reidsville. This paper’s purpose is to provide an overview of these programs to inform local government managers, administrators, and elected officials about key considerations for possible program implementation. The research questions guiding this capstone paper are:

In selected North Carolina cities, how do rental property inspections programs function, and what are the returns on the cities’ investments in these programs?

Appendix A shows housing data for each of the five cities included in this study, as well as state-level data. The percentages of total housing units that are renter-occupied range from 42.1 to 47 percent, all above the statewide 30 percent. In four of the five cities, the percentages of housing stock built before 1970 are greater than 50 percent.

Rental Inspections Program Purposes. The purposes of all the programs focus on “preventing decay and deterioration” of rental housing by enforcing minimum housing standards.⁹ Other objectives include:

- To protect tenants and prevent families from moving into substandard housing (Greensboro)¹⁰
- To stop landlords from renting substandard housing to immigrants (Greensboro)¹¹
- To address related problems of overcrowding and public nuisances (Morganton)¹²
- To protect older neighborhoods (Asheville)¹³
- To avoid the greater costs associated with alleviating slum and blight conditions (Statesville)¹⁴

Program Formats. Table 1 summarizes main aspects of each program. Greensboro, Morganton, and Asheville established five-year provisional periods for landlords to arrange inspections and obtain certifications before receiving penalties. On January 1, 2009, Greensboro's legal sanctions will take effect for properties without valid minimum housing certifications.

Table 1: Details of proactive rental property inspections programs in selected North Carolina cities

City	Program dates	Staff	Fees for inspection or rental license	Time periods for rental inspections	Tracking compliance through utility use
Greensboro	2004 – present	7 housing inspectors	None	5 years or upon complaint	No
Asheville	1994 – 2003	3 housing inspectors (used private inspectors)	\$100 - \$125 per unit per inspection	5 years or upon complaint	Yes Water
Statesville	1976 – present	1 housing inspector	None	At change of tenants or upon complaint	Yes Electricity and water
Morganton	2003 – present	4 combined housing and building inspectors	None Free rental permit every 5 years	3 years, at change of tenants, or complaint	Yes Electricity and water
Reidsville	1995 – present	3 combined housing and building inspectors	\$15 per unit per year for rental property privilege license	3 years or upon complaint	Yes Water

Each city made a variety of choices concerning program format. Three main program variations are:

1.) *Fees.* Greensboro, Morganton, and Statesville made their inspections free of charge to compliant landlords. Reidsville charges yearly fees of \$10-\$15 per unit for rental property privilege licenses. Asheville directly charged landlords for the cost of inspections (\$100-\$125 per unit). In Asheville, licensed private housing inspectors conducted initial inspections and city staff provided follow-up visits.

2.) *Tracking through Utility Changes.* All cities, except Greensboro, use (or used) change of utility accounts to track compliance and enforce inspections requirements. These cities will not provide utilities to noncompliant rental properties. In addition to water services, Morganton and Statesville also distribute electricity. The threat of withholding utility services, especially electricity, may be a powerful tool for encouraging compliance.

3.) *Scope of Inspections.* Except for Statesville, all the cities use sampling methods to inspect a representative portion of units in larger apartment complexes. For example, Asheville inspected 20 percent of such units.¹⁵ Greensboro conducts proactive inspections of only rental properties. While beyond the scope of this paper, inspections of owner-occupied properties warrant brief mention. Morganton, Statesville, and Reidsville conduct inspections of owner-occupied residential properties at change of ownership but require more frequent inspections of rental properties (every three to five years). Asheville also conducted inspections of both renter- and owner-occupied properties.

Program Costs. Before implementing an inspections program, a city must estimate program costs and time needed to complete the initial round of inspections, given staff size.¹⁶ Total costs per inspection range from \$51 to \$75.¹⁷ Housing inspections supervisors estimate that one full-time housing inspector can complete six inspections per day.¹⁸ If a city has 10,000 rental units and one housing inspector, that inspector would need approximately seven years to complete initial inspections (given 48 work weeks per year).¹⁹ A housing inspector's salary range is \$32,500 to \$43,000.²⁰

To implement its program, Morganton increased its inspections staff by one. Greensboro and Reidsville did not hire any additional housing inspectors, but Greensboro added three lower-paid, part-time staff to focus on other local ordinance violations, such as abandoned and junked vehicles.²¹ Asheville used private inspectors and transferred costs directly to landlords through fees.²²

Measures of Effectiveness – Decreased Number of Complaints. Through proactive rental inspections programs, the cities aim to prevent and correct housing deterioration and unsafe living conditions. The number of complaints a city receives about substandard housing is an important measure of program effectiveness. If inspections programs result in code compliance, a city should receive fewer complaints. Greensboro's program began in 2004.²³ Chart 1 shows that after a high of 1,427 housing complaints in 2005, the number of complaints fell by 61 percent to 871 in 2007. Asheville operated its program from 1994 to 2003, with full implementation of legal sanctions in 1999. Chart 2 shows that after a decrease from 227 to 60 complaints between 2001 and 2003, Asheville's complaints rose to 189 in 2007.²⁴

Chart 1: Greensboro complaints

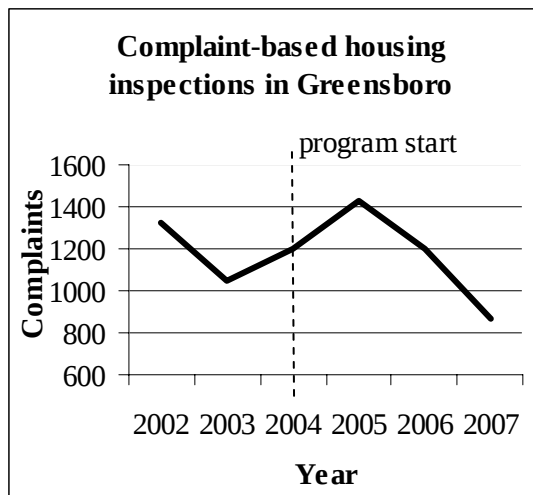
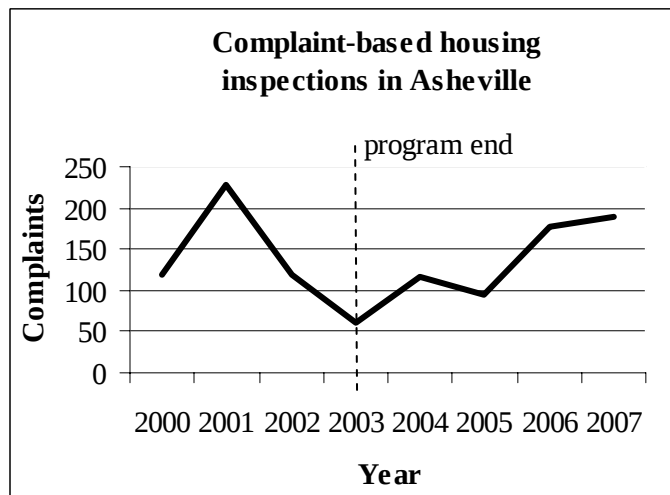


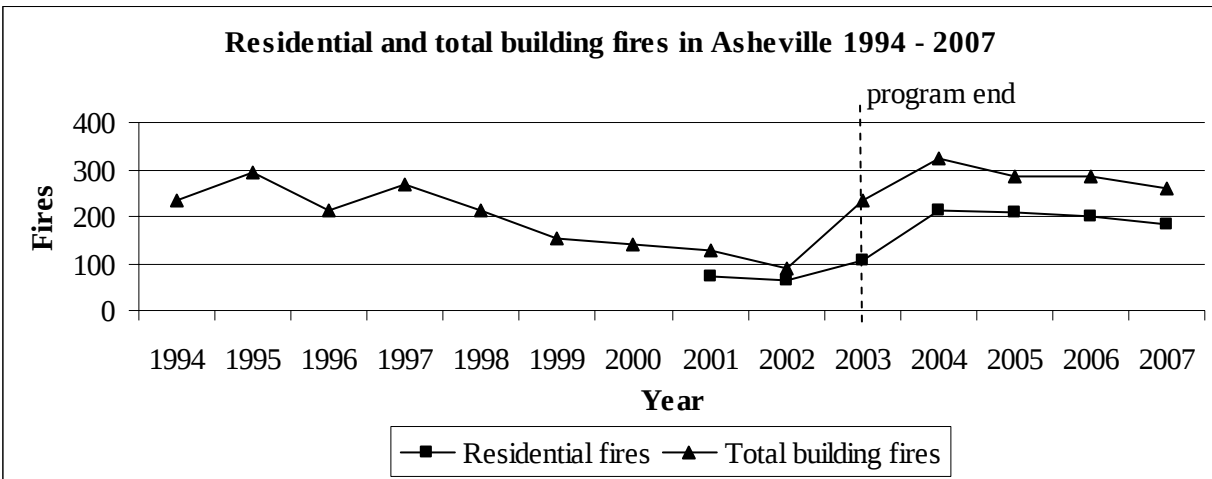
Chart 2: Asheville complaints



From 2005 to 2007, Statesville received only eight to 16 housing complaints a year. For the cities with available data, housing complaints per 1,000 units of housing stock are as follows: Greensboro (9.43), Asheville (6.13), and Statesville (1.71). The long existence of Statesville's inspections program, more than 30 years, may contribute to its lower rate of complaints. Statesville inspections staff reports that experienced landlords have learned how to comply with city codes.

Decreased Residential Fires. Decrease in fires is another important indicator that inspections programs are ensuring housing safety. In 2002, the city of Asheville reported that the number of residential fires had decreased by 50 percent since it fully implemented its inspections program in 1999.²⁵ Chart 3 shows Asheville's total building fires (1994-2007) and residential fires (2001-2007). After a low of 65 residential fires in 2002, residential fires began to increase in 2003, when proactive inspections ended, up to 187 in 2007.²⁶

Chart 3: Asheville fires



More Rapid Compliance with Housing Codes. In four years, Greensboro has brought more than 8,700 rental properties up to minimum standards.²⁷ The Greensboro Housing Coalition reports that the number of rental units in active violation of Greensboro's housing code fell from 1,250 in 2004 to 441 in November 2007 (a 65 percent decrease).²⁸ Chart 4 shows time to compliance for proactive rental inspections (2004-2007) versus complaint-based inspections (2002-2007) for Greensboro. In this chart, same-day compliance may indicate that inspectors found no problems or that landlords made prompt repairs. Of the over 20,000 proactive rental inspections Greensboro has conducted since 2004, 88 percent of rental properties were in compliance with housing codes within 30 days of initial inspection, compared to just 30 percent of properties receiving complaint-based inspections. The knowledge that all rental properties must be certified as compliant with housing codes before January 1, 2009, may provide added incentive for landlords to make prompt repairs and receive certifications.

Chart 4: Complaint versus proactive inspections

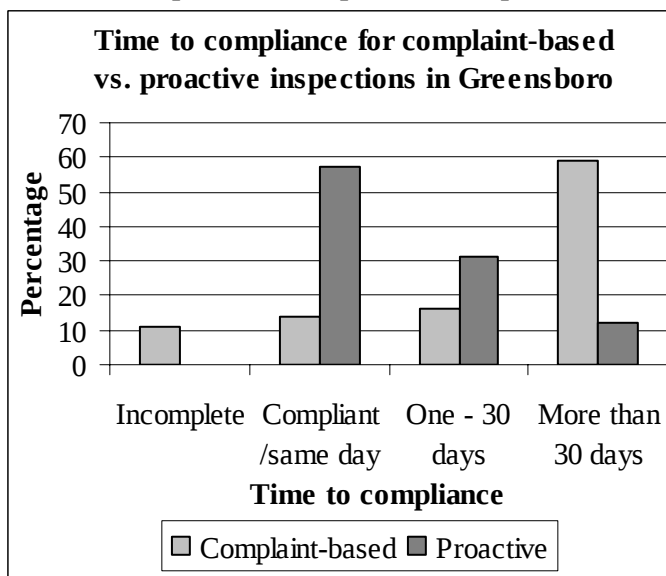


Chart 5: First day rental compliance

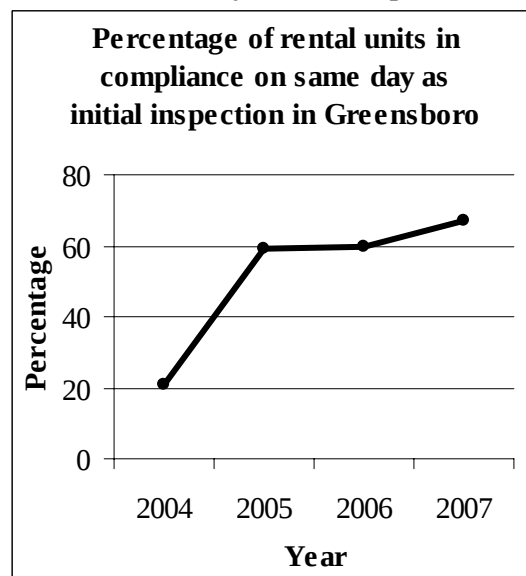


Chart 5 shows that the percentage of rental properties in compliance at time of initial inspection increased from 21 percent in 2004 to 67 percent in 2007. These data suggest that landlords are increasingly prepared for inspections, potentially indicating the success of Greensboro's public information efforts.

Barriers to Program Implementation. During interviews, program staff in each city mentioned various barriers to program implementation, including:

- *Staff Capacity to Conduct Extensive Inspections.* Greensboro originally set its deadline for completing initial inspections for July 1, 2007, but changed that deadline to January 1, 2009, because staff needed more time to complete inspections.²⁹
- *Resistance to Fees.* Asheville's program is no longer operating, in large part because of resistance to inspections fees. Landlords objected to the high fees and put pressure on officials to change policies.³⁰
- *Organized Landlord Opposition.* Landlords in Asheville organized through landlord and real estate associations and successfully changed program policies.³¹ Greensboro involved landlords in program development, but landlord associations disapproved of the final program format.³² Landlord association representatives sit on Greensboro's program advisory board.³³

Success Factors for Program Implementation. Staff also mentioned the following factors for success:

- *Housing as City Council Priority.* The Greensboro city council adopted safe and affordable housing as a consistent council priority.³⁴ It unanimously voted in favor of Greensboro's rental ordinance and inspections program.³⁵
- *Broad Citizen Support.* In Morganton, program recommendations developed out of a fair housing task force.³⁶ In Greensboro, initial recommendations came from a citizen subcommittee on housing.³⁷ Greensboro involved over 300 citizen representatives in its program planning. Greensboro also had the support of the Greensboro Neighborhood Congress, a coalition of 45 neighborhood associations.³⁸
- *Presence of Nonprofit Partners.* As Greensboro's leading housing advocate, the Greensboro Housing Coalition (GHC) was instrumental in the city's adoption of its rental inspections program.³⁹ A nonprofit organization, GHC had the flexibility to convene stakeholders and to petition council members for support. Since 2004, GHC has informed the Greensboro public about the program, monitored the progress of inspections, and reported successes.

Concluding Considerations for Proactive Rental Inspections. Conducting proactive inspections to enforce legal requirements that rental properties meet housing codes may result in beneficial community outcomes. As available data indicate, the returns on investments in proactive rental inspections programs may include decreasing the number of housing complaints from citizens, decreasing the number of residential fires, and prompting landlords to invest in maintenance and timely repairs of rental properties. Before deciding to adopt more stringent rental property regulations and to issue minimum housing certifications through proactive rental inspections, city leaders and staff must clarify the city's goals and analyze other situational factors. Key considerations include whether the city would need to hire additional inspections staff, whether it would link housing certifications with access to utility services, and whether the city has sufficient political support for the rental ordinance and inspections program.

When planning and implementing rental inspections programs, staff should incorporate performance measures that accurately indicate progress towards meeting program goals. Such measures can help staff evaluate levels of effectiveness and identify areas for improvement. For potentially controversial programs, collection and reporting of performance measures become particularly important. As in Asheville, proactive rental inspections programs can easily become targets of landlord associations or city council members with differing agendas. Along with informing staff, performance measures can also demonstrate to council members and citizens that rental inspections programs are worth the investment of city resources and the added costs to landlords. Cities creating or administering rental inspections programs would benefit from operational procedures and database technologies that enable staff to track progress in individual cases and also create reports on program outputs and outcomes, such as types of inspections, time to compliance, and number of properties with repeat violations. A carefully planned and well implemented proactive rental inspections program may be a valuable tool for cities to certify that rental properties meet housing codes and to ensure that all citizens gain the benefits of quality housing.

¹ Chenoweth, David. "The Economic Cost of Substandard Housing Conditions among North Carolina Children." Prepared for the North Carolina Housing Coalition, May 2, 2007.

² Grieson, Ronald and James White. "The Existence and Capitalization of Neighborhood Externalities: A Reassessment." *Journal of Urban Economics* 25, no. 2 (1989): 68-76. As cited in: Crichton, Ian, Matt Rosenberg, and Joe Thompson. "Rental Unit Licensing: Applicability to Milwaukee." La Follette School of Public Affairs. University of Wisconsin-Madison web site.

³ Wilson, James Q. and George L. Kelling. "Broken Windows: The Police and Neighborhood Safety." *The Atlantic Monthly*, March 1982, 29-38.

⁴ City of Greensboro Engineering and Inspections Department web site: <http://www.greensboro-nc.gov/departments/Engineering/resident/renter/>

From web site, pertaining to minimum housing standards:

Housing Premises

Houses must be structurally sound and must be waterproof and weatherproof.

Equipment and Furnishings

Occupants of a house must be supplied with adequate heating facilities, potable water, sanitary facilities, and adequate space for sleeping.

Sanitation

All rooms used by the occupants of a house must be maintained in a clean and sanitary condition.

Content of minimum housing codes vary by city. For example, Greensboro uses the 2000 International Property Maintenance Code by the International Code Council. Morganton uses the Standard Housing Code 1997 edition by the Southern Building Code Congress International, Inc.

⁵ Barkley, Melissa. "Summit Aims to Mend City's Unsafe Housing." *Greensboro News and Record*, January 29, 2003, B4.

⁶ In North Carolina, state enabling statutes establish parameters for many aspects of the inspections process. However, the statutes do not explicitly authorize local government power to prohibit a landlord from leasing a housing unit if it is not in compliance with minimum housing codes (*N.C.G.S.* 160A-443).

⁷ Greensboro's program has a specific name and acronym: Rental Unit Certificate of Occupancy Program (RUCO).

Several other municipalities in North Carolina conduct proactive rental property inspections (populations in parentheses):

- Ayden (4,622)
- Farmville (4,302)
- Lexington (19,953)

These municipalities are all ElectriCities, operating their own electric distribution systems.

Several municipalities have other variations of rental property inspections and registration programs:

- Raleigh (276,093) has a program named Probationary Rental Occupancy Permit (PROP) for landlords who violate housing codes.
- Garner (17,751) requires an annual registration fee of \$25 per landlord but does not conduct inspections.
- Elizabeth City (17,118) requires an annual registration fee of \$25 per rental unit but does not conduct inspections.
- From 2002-2005, Chapel Hill (48,715) required an annual registration fee of \$10 per unit and required landlords to conduct self-inspections of their properties to certify minimum housing code compliance.

States have varying policies concerning proactive inspections of rental properties:

- Georgia outlawed proactive inspections without probable cause and outlawed rental property registration under any circumstance (*O.C.G.A. §36-74-30*).
- Iowa requires proactive inspections in cities with populations of 15,000 or more (*Iowa Code §364.17*).
- Virginia has outlawed proactive inspections, except in “rental inspections districts,” which may be established based on evidence of need (*Code of Virginia §36-105.1:1*).
- New Jersey requires owners of buildings with three or more units to register each building, and each building must be inspected at least every five years (*N.J.S.A. §55.13A*).
- In 2007, the North Carolina General Assembly considered outlawing proactive rental property inspections without probable cause, but no legislation has been passed (SB1507/HB1011).

⁸ In August 2003, Asheville city council voted 4-3 to end proactive inspections. (Williams, Melissa. “Asheville City Council to Debate Minimum Housing Code Again.” *Asheville Citizen-Times*, March 17, 2003, A1.)

⁹ City of Greensboro Engineering and Inspections Department web site.

¹⁰ Binker, Mark. “Apartment Owners Blast Plan.” *Greensboro News and Record*, April 11, 2003, B4.

¹¹ Interview with Dan Reynolds, Code Enforcement Manager, City of Greensboro.

¹² Interview with Lee Anderson, Michael Crotts, and Jackie Cain, City of Morganton staff.

¹³ Interview with Marlene Frisbee, Housing Supervisor, Building Safety Department, City of Asheville.

¹⁴ Interview with David Stewart, Planner, City of Statesville.

¹⁵ Interview with Marlene Frisbee.

¹⁶ Greensboro staff underestimated (by about half) the time and expense required to complete inspections. Prior to program adoption, staff estimated an inspection would cost \$27 and seven inspectors would be able to complete 1,500 inspections per month (about 10 inspections per inspector/day). For 2007, the actual cost per inspection was \$51. Each inspector is able to complete about six inspections per day. The seven inspectors are expected to complete about 700 inspections per month (Binker, Mark. “Inspections Unnecessary, Landlords Say.” *Greensboro News and Record*, May 15, 2003, B1; Interview with Dan Reynolds).

¹⁷ Cost per inspection estimates: \$51 (Greensboro) to \$75 (Morganton). Greensboro cost per inspection estimate comes from 2007-08 Inspections Division Performance Measures. Morganton estimate provided by Lee Anderson. Staff in Asheville, Statesville, and Reidsville were unable to provide cost per inspections estimates.

¹⁸ Six inspections per day is based on estimates provided by staff in Greensboro and Asheville. This estimate is in line with housing inspections data in Ammons, David N. *Municipal Benchmarks: Assessing Local Performance and Establishing Community Standards*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2001, 78-79, 81.

¹⁹ Estimate of 48 work weeks per year accounts for two weeks paid vacation, plus holidays and sick leave.

²⁰ Salary range listed is for Greensboro. The starting salary in Reidsville is slightly less (\$28,682 - \$43,023). The estimated range for Morganton is \$31,400 - \$47,000. In Asheville, the wage for a housing inspector starts at \$16 per hour.

²¹ Binker. “Inspections Unnecessary, Landlords Say.”

²² Landlords in Asheville claimed that the high cost of inspections would force them to raise rents. Assuming landlords own properties that are in compliance, funding a \$100 per unit inspections fee every five years would demand a rent raise of just \$0.34 a month (four dollars a year) for units in larger apartment complexes or \$1.67 a month (\$20 a year) for single-family rental homes (Burleson, Jenn. “Many Asheville Rental Units Missed Inspection.” *Asheville Citizen-Times*, August 3, 1999, B1.)

²³ Greensboro program statistics presented in this paper come from analysis of the City of Greensboro’s online local ordinance enforcement database.

²⁴ Morganton and Reidsville do not record whether an inspection is a routine proactive inspection or whether it occurs because of a complaint.

²⁵ Mackza, Beth. “Enforcement of Minimum Housing Code Substantially Decreases House Fires,” editorial. *Asheville Citizen-Times*, December 7, 2002, A9.

²⁶ Between 2003 and 2007 (time of available data), Morganton had between 14-21 residential fires each year. Yearly totals do not indicate a clear trend in residential fires (data provided by Crystal Hastings, Morganton Department of Public Safety Records Clerk).

²⁷ The concern that housing condemnation would displace residents is a common concern raised in discussions about rigorous housing inspections. In Greensboro, tenants have been displaced from only two housing units as a result of proactive inspections (Interview with Dan Reynolds). The Greensboro Housing Coalition has pledged to assist any displaced families (Swofford, Stan. “Greensboro’s New Inspections Policy Aims to Restore Neighborhoods and Eliminate Dilapidated Houses, but Some Say There will be Costs.” *Greensboro News and Record*, June 22, 2003, A1).

²⁸ Greensboro Housing Coalition Information Sheet.

²⁹ Dan Reynolds, Code Enforcement Manager, estimates that Greensboro housing inspectors will need to conduct an average of 725 inspections per month to meet the January 2009 deadline. Until January 2009, landlord participation in inspections is voluntary. Asheville found that many landlords delayed having inspections completed. (Fees charged in Asheville may have worsened this situation.) A little more than a month before full implementation (July 1, 1999), nearly 5,500 rental units had not received inspections. Between May 25 and July 1, 1999, private inspectors conducted initial inspections of about 3,640 units (“Housing Code Must be Taken Seriously,” editorial. *Asheville Citizen-Times*, May 25, 1999, 6A; Burleson, “Many Asheville Rental Units Missed Inspection”).

³⁰ In Asheville, a landlord or property management company that owned apartment complexes with 400 units was paying at least \$8,000 every five years for inspections. Reidsville charges an annual fee of \$15 per unit for a rental property privilege license, but the city has not experienced resistance to these fees. As a smaller city, Reidsville may not have the same level of landlord organization as Asheville.

³¹ Greensboro’s and Morganton’s programs still exist, but both cities reported opposition from landlords. In 2002, the governing bodies of the following organizations passed resolutions asking that Asheville end proactive inspections: the Asheville Board of Realtors, the Carolinas Real Estate Investors Association, the Council of Independent Business Owners, the Greater Asheville Area Apartment Association, and the Home Builders Association of Greater Asheville (Williams, Melissa. “Asheville City Council to Debate Minimum Housing Code Again.” *Asheville Citizen-Times*, March 17, 2003, A1).

³² In Greensboro, landlords made the following objections to proactive inspections:

- Inspections would cause “costly administrative hassles,” delays, and fees (Binker, “Apartment Owners Blast Plan”).
- Tenants would be prevented from renting for minor damages (Binker, Mark. “City to Inspect all Rental Units.” *Greensboro News and Record*, May 21, 2003, B1.).

- Thousands would be displaced (Swofford, Stan. “Greensboro’s New Inspections Policy Aims to Restore Neighborhoods and Eliminate Dilapidated Houses, but Some Say There will be Costs”).
- Fees would become a “housing tax,” and rents would increase (Swofford).

³³ Landlord associations with seats on Greensboro’s advisory board are Triad Apartment Association (TAA) and Triad Real Estate and Building Industry Coalition (TREBIC).

³⁴ Binker, Mark. “City to Inspect all Rental Units.” *Greensboro News and Record*, May 21, 2003, B1.

³⁵ Binker, “City to Inspect All Rental Units.”

³⁶ Interview with Lee Anderson.

³⁷ Binker, “Apartment Owners Blast Plan.”

³⁸ Downs, Patrick and Raymond Brown. “Certification Improves City’s Neighborhoods,” editorial. *Greensboro News and Record*, May 17, 2003, A8.

³⁹ GHC’s mission is “To advocate for decent, affordable housing for low and moderate income people and those with special needs” (GHC web site: <http://greensborohousingcoalition.com/>).

Appendix A: Housing data for selected North Carolina cities (2000 U.S. Census)

City	Population	Renter-occupied housing units	Renter-occupied as percentage of total housing	Rental vacancy rates	Percentage of houses built before 1970	Median rent in dollars
Greensboro	223,891	43,430	47.0	7.2	43.0	608
Asheville	68,889	13,262	43.2	8.1	62.5	562
Statesville	23,320	4,217	45.2	6.5	58.5	533
Morganton	17,310	2,938	43.0	4.5	55.0	475
Reidsville	14,485	2,529	42.1	5.8	65.7	451
North Carolina	8,049,313	959,658	30.6	8.8	35.2	548

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Special Thanks

School of Government Faculty

Capstone Committee Members

Gordon Whitaker, Committee Chair

Richard Ducker

David Owens

In Greensboro

Dan Reynolds, Code Enforcement Manager, Engineering and Inspections Department

Beth McKee Huger, Executive Director, Greensboro Housing Coalition

Cheryl Lilly, Administrative Assistant, Local Ordinance Enforcement, City of Greensboro

In Asheville

Marlene Frisbee, Housing Code Supervisor, Building Safety Department, City of Asheville

Assistant Chief Scott Burnette, Asheville Fire and Rescue, City of Asheville

In Statesville

David Stewart, Planner, Planning and Zoning Department, City of Statesville

Joann James, Program Assistant, Planning and Zoning Department, City of Statesville

Sherry Ashley, Assistant Director, Planning and Zoning Department, City of Statesville

In Morganton

Lee Anderson, Director, Development and Design Services, City of Morganton

Michael Crotts, Chief Building Inspector, City of Morganton

Jackie Cain, Administrative Manager, Development and Design Services, City of Morganton

In Reidsville

Donna Setliff, Assistant Director, Community Development Department, City of Reidsville

In Chapel Hill

Maggie Bowers, Senior Code Enforcement Officer, Town of Chapel Hill