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Sinkhole endangers homes

By Jim Wozniak
Press Staff Writer

A Johnson City condominium owner is upset with the contractor about a sinkhole that has put two units in danger.

Alfred DiGregorio, 16 Sterling Court, said he noticed a sinkhole had formed between his condominium and his neighbors' in Limited Edition in November when he and his wife returned from vacation and their bathroom door would not close.

He said he and the complex's homeowners association have talked with Walt Tittle, the contractor, and received assurances from him he would take action.

Tittle has not fixed the situation, and the Limited Edition Homeowners Association has hired Norman Construction Co. to handle it for $18,000, DiGregorio said. He also said the homeowners association has voted to take Tittle to court.

Meanwhile, the city's building department ordered gas to 16 Sterling Court and 18 Sterling Court shut off two weeks ago. Building Inspector Ted Pate said he and Gas/Mechanical Inspector David Jenny recommended that move because they feared the foundation might "pull," which might damage the meter and cause an explosion. Inspectors have had the area checked every day or two since.

"Since they cut the gas off, I can't bathe in the house because there is no hot water, and I can't eat in the house," DeGregorio said.

Tittle said he has turned over the matter to his insurance company. He said DeGregorio is "ahead of the game" because an insurance adjustor needs a few days and DeGregorio has to prove Tittle's negligence.
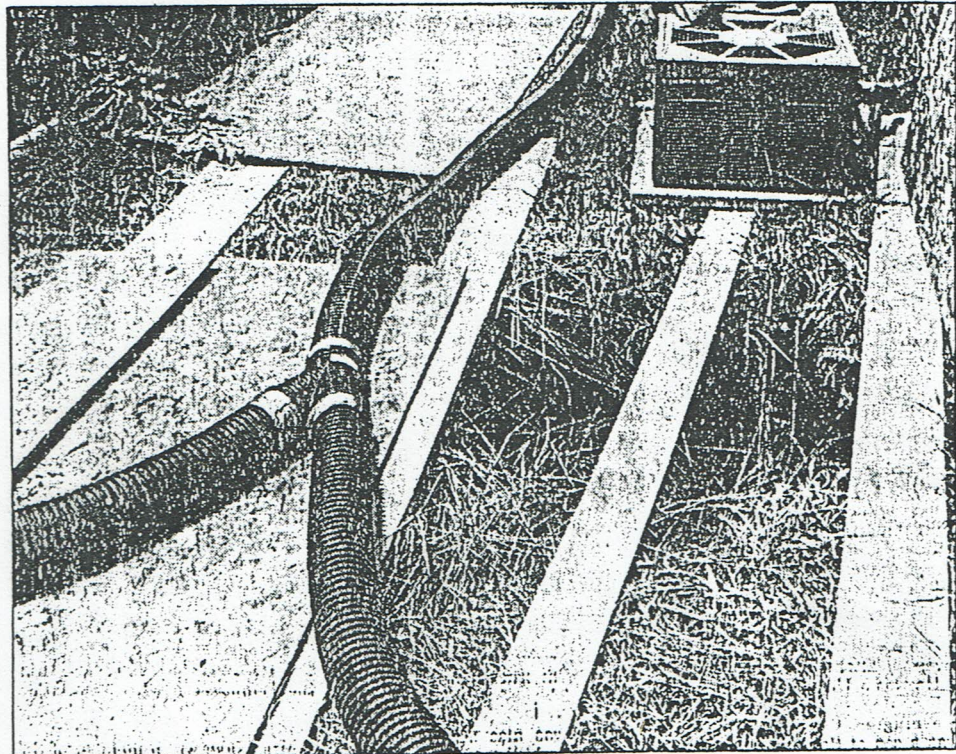
A letter from M. Frank Castleberry of Foundation Systems Engineering to Alberta Clyce, who owns the condominium at 18 Sterling, said the two condominiums are "in imminent danger of collapsing" in the rear. It states a "very poor drainage feature" installed during construction allowed surface water to consume the area between the two condominiums, causing the sinkhole.

The letter states erosion has let surface soils collapse and flow into the sinkhole. Erosion under the crawl spaces of the two condominiums is as large or larger than the sinkhole between the two condominiums, it states.

The only proper way to prevent more trouble is to underpin both units with a structural beam, the letter states. It states the sinkhole should be excavated to the bedrock and cleaned, with filter fabric placed there. Then open-graded stone should be added, it

Left, sign posted between condominium Nos. 16 and 18 on Sterling Court in Limited Edition subdivision warns of dangers caused by sinkholes on property; and below hoses running across sinkholes are an effort taken by condominium owner Alfred DiGregorio to control water which runs from a nearby hill. Residents blame the unit's developer Walt Tittle for their woes. (Staff Photos by Gordon Vest)

states.

"I can't wait for Mr. Tittle to do this," DeGregorio said.

Tittle said no one is to blame for the situation because he tested the soil prior to construction and found it was solid. He also said the city's building department gave him the OK to pour footers for the condominiums after it inspected the site. He also cited approval of the complex by the Johnson City Regional Planning Commission and the

city staff.

"It met city approval all the way through," Tittle said. "The cave is not my fault. When we dug the footings, we probably disturbed the cave. But we didn't know it existed. It's not an act of God, but nature."

Pate said DeGregorio's condominium has had a 250-square-foot enclosure added to the back since it was built in 1989. He said, though, the sinkhole is located near the bedroom, not the

enclosure. Tittle charges DeGregorio with diverting water from the roof from the enclosure area to the sinkhole.

As the dispute developed, city and state officials discovered Tittle had let his contractor's license lapse. Tittle said it was an oversight, and he since has submitted enough information and his licensing fee to satisfy the city and state. Pate said he was ready to stop all contracting jobs that Tittle had started.