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## Ridgewood Firm Has History Of Complaints

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By Eric F. Lipton Correspondent for The Capital Times\ The writer retains the copyright for this article

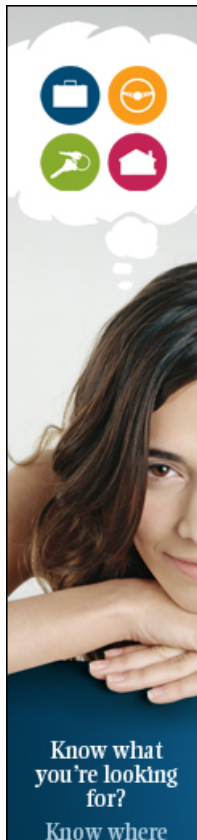
The Illinois-based management company responsible for a troubled Fitchburg apartment complex has a history of repair and customer service complaints, according to the Chicago-area Better Business Bureau.

The complaints against Comprehensive Management Services Inc. (CMS), six of which were filed in the past year, led the Better Business Bureau of Chicago and Northern Illinois to say the company has an "unsatisfactory record."

The complaints include several for "product quality," "repair" and "customer service." Overall, 13 were filed over three years, of which only seven were classified as resolved.

CMS Director of Operations Gary Johnstone said he wasn't aware of his company's Better Business Bureau status. "Every property has certain problems," he said.

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Geneva, Ill.-based CMS is at the center of the storm over the maintenance and upkeep of the 865-unit Ridgewood Country Club apartments on Traceway Drive in Fitchburg, which is one of 36 properties throughout the Midwest and Florida run by the company. Renters and Fitchburg city officials have expressed concerns about the safety of the buildings, citing repeated flooding, mold and poor control of heating and cooling systems.

Resident complaints that CMS, which is responsible for upkeep of the buildings, was slow to respond to concerns led to involvement by Fitchburg's mayor, who will be holding a public meeting Monday on the issue. The meeting will be Leopold School at 6:30 p.m.

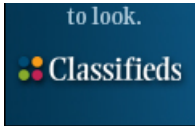
"We want to hear all of the concerns" of Ridgewood residents, said Mayor Tom Clauder. "We want to make sure the city is fully aware of how things are going."

The meeting follows an agreement between the city and CMS for monthly meetings to discuss improvements to Ridgewood. Clauder had issued an April 15 deadline for CMS to address the concerns after a petition with 200 signatures was presented at a March City Council meeting.

Johnstone said the meetings between CMS and the city will continue through September.

CMS also held its own meeting with residents, a closed-door discussion at the complex that Johnstone said was "very productive."

"The work (to fix the apartments) was minimal -- the problem was communication," Johnstone said. "The majority of complaints were over lack of communication and it opened



our eyes that we hadn't been communicating well."

To address these problems, Johnstone said CMS hired a new building manager and two more maintenance personnel, contracted out the cleaning of hallways, and has begun producing a monthly newsletter "to put some things in the hands of residents."

Some residents are unimpressed with CMS' new efforts.

Jodi Johnstone, a 25-year resident of Ridgewood, said she's seeing "a lot of band-aiding" of the buildings' problems. "They're not fixing the real problems at all," she said.

"The apartments are falling apart. The plumbing is bad, the roof leaks, the basement floods and their solution is to put in a new laundry room. I don't care if my rent goes up, they need to do more than just spray-paint over the moldy walls."

Repair and customer service issues are at the heart of the complaints against CMS submitted to the Better Business Bureau, according to MaryAnn Wixom, operations manager for the Better Business Bureau's Rockford, Ill., office.

However, she said CMS earned their "unsatisfactory rating" due to their lack of response to several complaints.

"We're mostly concerned with whether a business answers the complaints," she said. "Do they try to take care of them? If there is no response from the company, then probably they don't."

She said businesses normally answer complaints quickly to avoid a negative rating.

Complaints to the Better Business Bureau must be sent in letter form, Wixom said. After researching to make sure they are not "frivolous," the bureau contacts the business on behalf of the consumer. "We're a mediation/arbitration service," Wixom said.

When a business is notified by mail of a complaint, they have 14 days to respond, she said. A second letter is sent later, with a 10-working-day deadline. "We're not that strict, though," Wixom said about the deadlines.

She said she wasn't able to give details about the 13 complaints, or say whether they were in regards to the Ridgewood apartments or other properties owned by CMS, which is based in Illinois but owns properties in other states as well.

However, on the Web site Apartment Ratings.com, two dozen residents of a CMS property in Indianapolis give harshly negative reviews to their building, citing maintenance, mold and communication issues similar to those expressed by renters at Ridgewood.

Problems were also cited at a CMS building in Cleveland, Ohio, in 1997. According to the Cleveland Plain Dealer, residents went to court to avoid getting their utilities shut off after bills had gone unpaid by the management company. And in February, CMS was fined \$2,709 by the Environmental Protection Agency for violation of lead-based paint disclosure laws. The settlement is not an admission of guilt, according to EPA documents.

Six complaints against CMS have also been filed with the Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection, according to Consumer Protection Specialist Glen Loyd. These complaints are specifically in regards to the Ridgewood apartments.

Asked if the Better Business Bureau complaints were similar to those cited at Ridgewood, Johnstone said, "Ridgewood is unique. CMS doesn't have these problems elsewhere."

The Better Business Bureau complaints fell in all five of the bureau's complaint sections: one for repairs and service, four for product quality, one for refund or exchange issues, one for contract issues and six for customer service issues. CMS did not respond to one complaint in each of these categories, for a total of five.

Fitchburg Administrator Tony Roach said Fitchburg officials were unaware of prior complaints against CMS. "We're just focusing on their responsiveness to our residents' issues," he said.

#### MEETING

Mayor calls meeting: Fitchburg officials will meet with Ridgewood apartment residents in the Leopold School cafeteria at 6:30 p.m. Monday. Representatives of the police, fire and building inspection departments will attend to answer questions.