



Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel

Rosa Rodriguez stares at her rain-soaked belongings, which her apartment-complex manager told her to put outside while workers brought the dwelling up to code. The work has yet to be done, Rodriguez said.

Beach Flats landlord rolls back apartment rents

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Beach Flats landlord Victor Rodriguez has agreed to roll back the rent on four apartments with outstanding code violations and cut \$100 a month from rents for tenants who've been there for more than a year.

Councilman Keith Sugar calls it a victory, but some tenants say it won't be enough to keep them from getting squeezed out of the complex at 204 Riverside Ave. Several tenants have taken emergency rental assistance from the Community Action Board's Shelter Project since the rent increased in December.

One woman who spoke at the meeting said the emergency rent relief she's receiving from the Community Action Board's Shelter Project will expire after March and she'll probably have to find a new place to live because her rent has doubled over the last year.

"My emergency rent relief ran out last month," Jema Cruz, another tenant, said in Spanish. "What else can I do? I just work more."

Both Cruz's brother and mother left the apartment complex after when the rent doubled during the last year. In November 1999, Rodriguez bought the apartment complex, which faced code violations on four apartments. He raised the rent at least twice during the next year, doubling rents from \$540 to \$995 for a studio, \$625 to \$1,195 for a one bedroom, and \$1,000 to \$1,350

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JEMA CRUZ, 204 RIVERSIDE AVE. TENANT

for a two bedroom.

City law makes it illegal for landlords to raise the rent on apartments with outstanding code violations. City Attorney John Barisone sent Rodriguez a letter Dec. 29 ordering him to roll back rents and refund the difference.

Barisone said he expects to receive a letter from Rodriguez confirming his intent to roll back rents on the four apartments with outstanding code violations in March. If he complies, Barisone said there's no reason to file suit against him.

"We agree that a \$100 deduction in rent when he's raised it \$600-plus is not acceptable," Mayor Tim Fitzmaurice said Tuesday when residents asked the council to fight Rodriguez's proposal.

"We'll continue to fight the good fight and continue to hold him to the highest standard."

A lawsuit against him is the only recourse the city has to force a rent reduction, and that leaves community members who have assisted the tenants at 204 Riverside Ave. and coun-

cil members with few other options.

"We'll hold him very strictly to the letter of the law," said Councilman Sugar. "But Rodriguez is free to do what he wants if he complies with the law. It's tough. It's a very tough situation."

Rodriguez said he'll roll back rents on the four units in March and reduce rent for all the other tenants who've been there since he bought the building by \$100.

"What I'm doing with the \$100 rent reduction is a good-faith gesture," Rodriguez said. "I want to do what I can to help out a little. I don't want to be a bad guy in this."

Rodriguez and his manager are in the middle of major renovations, since a city building inspection found code violations in each of the complex's 32 apartments in January.

Those violations ranged from leaking faucets to lack of heat and electricity, outdated wiring, mold on the walls, floors and windows, spongy, rotting floors, nonfunctioning plumbing, doors that won't lock and traces of insects and rodents.

Rodriguez met with Chief Building Official Dick Stubendorff Wednesday, along with a certified plumber and electrician to repair the building. Stubendorff said he's satisfied with Rodriguez's progress and will inspect the apartments next week.

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