

As plans to improve their run-down neighborhood fall through with regularity, Beach Flats residents feel

Stuck in the Middle



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

A family gathers to play in the Beach Flats area of Santa Cruz, where low-income residents are struggling with high housing costs.

Plight of city's poorest never seems to change le 2500

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Beach Flats

SANTA CRUZ

✓ **A**drian Cruz doesn't live in either of the apartment complexes the city wanted to raze and replace with new affordable housing. But the young Beach Flats resident sure could use some affordable housing, and quick.

At the end of the month, Cruz will be evicted from his Raymond Street home. This, after his landlord raised his rent \$500 over the past year, taking it to \$1,500 for a small two-bedroom house. He says he hasn't had much time to look for a new place since he's working double shifts at a local restaurant to pay the extra rent.

In some ways, Cruz is no different from any other Santa Cruz-area resident who's been hit by the tight housing market and rising property values.

But nowhere is the county's housing crisis more dramatic than in Beach Flats, a pocket of poverty in the shadow of the Boardwalk, the city's top tourist attraction. The colorfully named triangle, populated largely by Latino immigrants, has deteriorated into a hodgepodge of apartment buildings, motels, cottages and overcrowded houses, most of them built at the turn of the century as summer bungalows. It is arguably the lowest of the city's few low-income neighborhoods.

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Dan Coyro/Sentinel

Maria de Jesus Masias saw her rent increase \$125 to \$1,000 a month while her living conditions continue to deteriorate. Many Beach Flats residents are paying more for housing as prices skyrocket across the San Francisco Bay Area.

THROUGH THE ROOF

About the series

Through the Roof is an occasional series on the housing crisis in Santa Cruz County.

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Beach Flats: City fails at efforts to improve its poorest neighborhood

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Some blame the landlords. Some blame the city for not having the political will to redevelop the area. Others, like Legal Aid of the Central Coast attorney Claire Schwartz, says a big part of the problem is that the city doesn't enforce its own health and safety codes.

Schwartz says inadequate staffing of the code enforcement department makes it impossible to follow through on complaints from residents. That, say Schwartz and others, means some property owners repeatedly violate building codes and the only thing the city can do is tag the structures with a red "No occupancy" sign and evict the residents. That does little to house those desperate for decent shelter.

"The cases we deal with are the most extreme: raw sewage coming up through the shower pipes," Schwartz said. "The tenant has almost always attempted to deal with the landlords personally first."

For years, Cruz, his girlfriend and two children — and the two single men who rent a room in the house — put up with a roof so shot through that mud got into the walls, causing the walls to weep and mildew. There were too few electrical outlets, so they resorted to stringing the house with extension cords.

In the winter, the house retained little heat. When a new landlord came in and replaced the roof, Cruz said he thought things were getting better. Instead, his rent was raised and he received an eviction notice.

The stories are similar throughout the Flats, 25 acres bordered by the San Lorenzo River, Santa Cruz Beach Boardwalk and Riverside Avenue. Residents say rent is going up but little is being done to improve their homes — homes the city's code enforcement office regard as some of the worst in the city.

City staff says conditions have gotten to the point that the City Council will soon consider a plan to toughen regulations and impose heftier fines on landlords deemed repeat offenders.

'I want to try to leave the neighborhood by September. I can't take it anymore.'

M A R I A

D E J E S U S

M A S I A S

the current council says its most recent effort is "dead in the water" because of opposition from residents and landlords. Tenants of the Dolphin and Lee apartment buildings targeted for demolition and replacement say they want lower rent and better apartments, but they don't trust the city to carry it out without displacing them.

Former Mayor Bruce Van Allen, a longtime tenant-rights activist and former member of the Santa Cruz Community Housing Corp. that built the Neary Lagoon and La Playa affordable-housing projects, said tenants have reason to be suspicious.

The city has tried for years to build affordable housing in Beach Flats and "something kept going wrong," he said.

"Someone would be mad at one of the council members and say, 'Forget it, I'm not playing anymore,' or the project would require eminent domain and the council, for whatever reason, would just not be willing to take that step."

"The problem with affordable housing is that there's no simple solution," Van Allen said. "If there were, we'd be done by now."

All of the political debate over redevelopment means little to Maria de Jesus

Masias, 38, who moved into Beach Flats only a year ago. Before that, she was living at a coastal ranchero picking mushrooms.

She said she thought she was moving up by moving to the small two-bedroom apartment on Raymond Street she shares with five other adults and two children. Instead, she said, she sees housing getting worse and rents going up. In the past month, her rent went from \$875 to \$1,000.

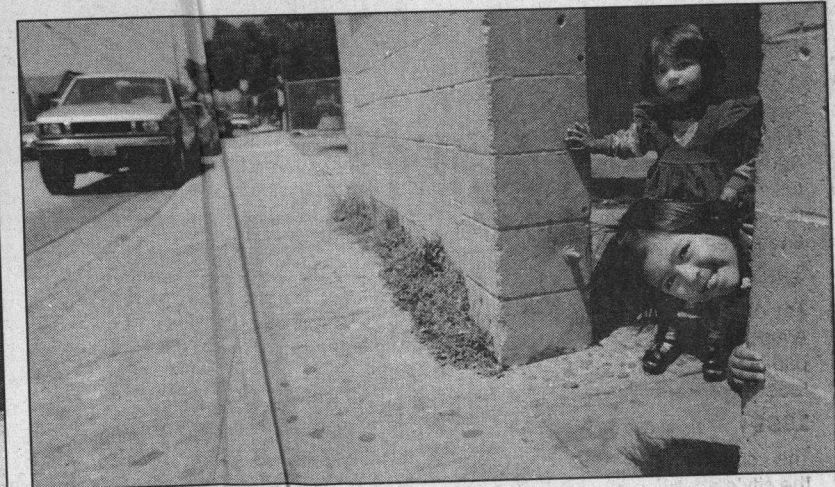
Wheeling her clothes home from a coin laundry on Riverside Drive, Masias pointed to the thick, bare bolts sticking out of the cinderblock wall around her apartment complex. There used to be a gate there but it was torn down months ago and nothing has been done to replace it.

Anyone can and does enter the complex at night, she said. As she spoke, a police officer walked past, inspected a



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel photos

Clockwise from top: A child cries from the window of her Beach Flats home; youngsters play amid the dreary conditions of their run-down neighborhood; a man waits along a bleak side street.



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"Housing has long been a crisis in Beach Flats," said Francisco Serna, executive director of the Beach Flats Community Center.

There are good things in the Flats, Serna said. Crime has come down even as rents have gone up. Though neighbors still complain about prostitution and drug sales taking place in broad daylight, Beach Flats isn't the crime capital of the city anymore. In fact, Police Chief Steve Belcher said it has dropped to the fifth highest crime area in the city, behind both Pacific Avenue and downtown Santa Cruz in general.

"The neighborhood is poised for improvements," Serna said. "It's ready for good things to happen."

"But the term 'affordable housing' is a misnomer. There's no such thing as affordable housing in Beach Flats. What makes it affordable is the number of people living there. You have housing built for another time and another purpose and people sharing the costs of this housing. The reality, looking into the future, is what are we going to do?"

There's no easy answer. The City Council has been struggling with the question for decades and members of

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Shrugging, Masias said the officer probably was investigating drug sales. As she patted down her folded clothes in front of her apartment, she said she worries for her children. Just days earlier, the power was cut off for half the day. She still doesn't know why.

"I want to try to leave the neighborhood by September," she said in Spanish. "I can't take it anymore."

Masias and other tenants said they scramble to make the rent each month.

Cruz, who is working more shifts to cover his rent, lives near the tiny Leibbrandt Street studio that is home to his mother, Manuela Cruz. She said her husband is going back to Mexico to work and will send money to help her make rent. She is old and has diabetes. She can't work.

"I'm not sure what I would do," she said, clasping her hands in front of her and peering at the Mexican soap opera on her TV. "I know about the city's plan to buy land and renovate the neighborhood. And even though the city keeps saying it's going to fix things and it never does, I still trust them."

