

Beach Flats complex to be discussed

Council looks at Lee Apartments in closed session

Beach Flats
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The Lee Apartments in Beach Flats may be back on the agenda of the Santa Cruz City Council.

After dropping the beleaguered apartment complex from its planned affordable housing project in July, citing overwhelming opposition from tenants and activists, the council will look at the complex again in closed session Tuesday.

Vice Mayor Christopher Krohn said it's just the beginning of any possible discussions with the apartment complex owners, and that the council may decide to again drop the complex from consideration.

"We'll see after the meeting what the council wants to do," Krohn said.

Tenants of the Lee, organized under the group Residentes Unidos, asked for a list of guarantees last year, including that the city's affordable housing provider, Mercy Charities Housing, be excluded from the project and that current tenants be moved into the new project without regard for their credit or criminal history.

The council did not agree to those terms, and a feud started between the council, the apartment manager, Julee Costanza-Gomez, and Nena Ruiz, the head of Residentes Unidos and the granddaughter of Lee Apartment owner Vernon Lee. The city claimed that Costanza-Gomez prevented staff from touring the property and speaking to tenants, while Ruiz claimed that the city was trying to punish tenants for organizing against rules they found unreasonable.

In August, Ruiz, who had been convicted of heroin possession at the Lee Apartments, told the Sentinel that part of the reason she opposed the city purchase of the property is because she wouldn't be permitted into the new complex.

Also on Tuesday's agenda, the council will consider approving a plan to encourage tenants of the Dolphin Apartments, located next door to the Lee and one of the apartment complexes the city purchased in November, to move out of the apartments early.

The city's plan was to demolish the Dolphin, Lee and Rex Court apartments in Beach Flats and rebuild an affordable housing complex containing about 50 apartments and a child care and community center. Without the Lee Apartments, the city has held off on making any major changes to the area. In December, the city demolished the vacant Rex Court Apartments.

Now the Redevelopment Agency wants to reduce the overcrowding in the 24 studios and eight one-bedroom apartments in the Dolphin by paying tenants a lump sum of \$5,250 each to move out now. It is not clear from the staff report whether those tenants would be eligible to return to the new apartment complex after it's built.

The city is required to pay tenants of a city-owned property relocation expenses if their property is taken away from them. The Redevelopment Agency estimates that over 50 single males live in the apartment complex now. If they all took the city up on the offer, it would cost \$270,000. The agency has money budgeted for this.

If tenants chose to stay, they will still be eligible for the relocation money when the city begins construction of a new building. In addition, tenants found to be living in the complex because it's "last resort housing" could be eligible for more than the \$5,250.

The council will address the Lee Apartment issue in closed session at 1:30 p.m. Tuesday, Jan. 23. It will address the Dolphin relocation proposal at its 4:30 p.m. Redevelopment Agency session.

Residents can attend open session meetings of the council, held at City Council Chambers, 809 Center Street, or can view the proceedings on Community TV of Santa Cruz, AT&T Broadband Channel 25.

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