

# Apartment residents win rent-hike reprieve

*Beach Flats*  
Citing failure to make repairs, city orders rollback at Beach Flats complex

By **HEATHER BOERNER**  
SENTINEL STAFF WRITER

SANTA CRUZ — The city has ordered a Beach Flats landlord to roll back rents in his apartment complex because old code violations haven't been fixed.

City Attorney John Barisone sent 204 Riverside Ave. owner Victor Rodriguez a letter Dec. 29, citing municipal law that makes it illegal for a residential property owner to increase the rent on any structure in need of repairs ordered by the city.

Code violations from 1999 and 2000 have yet to be fixed, and officials during an inspection last week found new violations in every one of the complex's 32 units, said Dick Stubendorff, the city's chief building official.

Barisone said he has yet to hear from Rodriguez, and is delaying further legal action until the city's building department issues Rodriguez a new repair order covering the latest inspection.

"Some of the problems are tenant-caused; they've disconnected smoke alarms and wires are just hanging from the ceiling," Stubendorff said. "But some are owner-caused. He's failed to keep the tenancy in the apartments to a reasonable number of inhabitants. There's lots of deferred maintenance and a lot of the work he's done in the last few weeks will have to be redone (because it was done poorly)."

Apparently aware that city officials would soon be touring the complex, work crews recently began repairing apartments late into the

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## Housing fund established

The city has established a trust fund to help residents of the Riverside Avenue apartments. Donations can be sent to: Parks and Recreation Department, c/o Dannette Shoemaker, 323 Church St., Santa Cruz, CA 95060.

To find out more about community meetings on the problems at 204 Riverside Ave., contact Tamara Sheinkman at 457-8093.

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## Apartment residents

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night, sometimes 1 a.m., tenants said.

The violations range from minor, like leaking faucets, to major, like no heat, electricity or water for days. They include:

- windows stuck open or closed; holes in walls and unlockable doors;
- overloaded electrical outlets and outdated circuitry;
- mold on walls, floors and windows, as well as spongy floors rotted with mildew;
- leaking or nonfunctioning plumbing, and inoperable stoves or ovens;
- traces of insects and rodents.

Rodriguez apparently inherited code violations the building's previous owner, Kick Zurich, refused to fix. Since purchasing the apartments in November 1999, Rodriguez has replaced the roofs and repainted the exteriors. He told the Sentinel last month he plans to spend \$750,000 replacing plumbing, burying electrical wires and generally renovating the building, home to mostly lower-income residents.

Once notified of the latest problems — Stubendorff plans to send Rodriguez a letter today — the owner will have 10 days to fix the major problems, such as plumbing, and up to 90 days to fix the general maintenance violations. If the violations aren't repaired in that time, Rodriguez could face daily fines under the city's new code-enforcement law.

Last week's code inspections were the result of tenant complaints. Many complex residents appealed to the City Council in December, asking for help in fighting a \$300 rent increase. The increase boosted the monthly cost of a studio to \$995, \$1,195 for a one-bedroom apartment and \$1,350 for two bedrooms.

Residents say many tenants paid the rent increases in January. Some said they sought emergency rental assistance from the Community Action Board. A check with the agency this week revealed 11 households were enrolled in the program.

Residents say at least three families moved out of the building after the rent increases were announced, and many more are planning to leave.

It was unclear Wednesday how residents would be credited for any increased rent they already have paid.

The apartment complex has become something of a rallying point for community members and Beach Flats residents. The city set up a trust fund to assist tenants, and community activists

## Seaside Co. remodels Beach Flats units

SENTINEL STAFF REPORT

SANTA CRUZ — The owner of the apartments at 204 Riverside Ave. may have received a city order to repair the complex, but the owner of an apartment complex across the street is doing major renovations on its own.

The Santa Cruz Seaside Co., which owns the nearby Santa Cruz Beach Boardwalk, is rehabilitating 10 bungalows at 211 Riverside Ave.

Seaside Co. spokesman John Robinson said the repairs began in the fall but went into high gear earlier this month. So far, work crews have replaced the roofs and are now moving inside to update the electric and heating systems.

"The apartments have been vacant for over a year, and we're fully aware of the need for housing in the area," Robinson said. "When we buy a building we always improve them but this one took a lot more work. It's not only old, it's historical."

Originally called the Riverside Cottages, the apartments were built in 1926 as summer bungalows. The improvements were approved by the city's Historical Preservation Commission. Robinson expects them to be available to rent in the spring.

and representatives of Legal Aid of the Central Coast, Community Action Board, Mercy Charities Housing and city staff plan to attend a meeting Friday in search of a long-term solution.

Several tenants showed up at Tuesday's council meeting to thank council members for their advocacy. But tenant Jema Cruz said tenants are far from naive about the future. Rents will go up.

"The rent assistance gives us one more month in the apartments," she said in Spanish. "And we're so grateful for all the help. But we're all clearly aware of what's happening. And for the long term, we're worried. We need a real solution."

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