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Seaside Co. makes its mark on Beach Flats

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SANTA CRUZ — If you look at a map, the biggest landlord and property owner in the crumbling Beach Flats neighborhood is Charles Canfield's Seaside Co., which has been steadily buying property, land and buildings in the area.

Clair Lindemann, a retired schoolteacher who has owned a home on Third Street, should know — she's bordered on each side and across the street by Seaside Co.-owned property.

Lindemann's section of Third Street is a stone's throw from the Giant Dipper at the Seaside Co.-owned Beach Boardwalk and across the street from a Seaside Co. parking lot that borders the San Lorenzo River.

On one side of her is an apartment building owned by the Seaside Co. and on the other another bungalow.

But Lindemann said she has never been approached by company representatives to sell her bungalow.

"If I had to go where would I go?" asked Lindemann. "They're trying to build the whole damn thing."

The Seaside Co. maintains its properties and puts "good people" in them, mostly employees, Lindemann conceded.

At the same time, she rues the constant company promotions that draw hordes of visitors to the Boardwalk and is angry over the Seaside Co.'s role in a proposed low-income housing project that would be built just down the street from her. The project, if built, "would bring more Mexicans and more dope," Lindemann said. Narcotics agents say a lot of the drugs sold in Beach Flats are sold by people in this country illegally.

The majority of Beach Flats residents are Latinos, many recent immigrants to the U.S. As the racial complexion of the neighborhood has changed, a few white residents have reacted by calling for a federal crackdown on illegal aliens. These reactions, in turn, have been called racist by leaders of the Latino community in Beach Flats.

Lindemann bought her place in 1973, a time when "you could walk on the streets at night," an activity she wouldn't dare do now because of drug dealers and violence, she said.

"What are they (the Seaside Co.) gonna do with all the property?" Lindemann asked. "I'll be dead and gone when they develop all this."

And while most of the Seaside Co. properties are well kept up in the shabby neighborhood, not all are. Down the street from Lindemann, an abandoned apartment building is boarded up, its yard littered

with wine bottles and filthy blankets. The property, 207 Third St., is owned by the Seaside Co., according to county tax records.

The Seaside Co. has bought other properties on Third Street, and on Riverside Avenue as well as Park Place and other Beach Flats neighborhoods. Many of these purchases have been made in the past five years, according to documents at the county Recorder's Office.

"We do have some properties (in Beach Flats)," Canfield said recently, adding he would like to "consolidate" some of the parcels. He also said the neighborhood's streets are in the wrong place — one plan calls for realigning Third Street — and that the area needs a "master plan" to guide development.

"There is nothing down there sacred," Canfield said.

City Councilman John Laird, who has been talking with the company about such a plan, said, "Since the Seaside Co. owns an increasing amount of land in Beach Flats, I hope they will use it as leverage to help upgrade the neighborhood."

Canfield, however, sees the upgrading as a partnership. To rebuild Beach Flats, which according to Canfield is a "disgrace for the community and I feel very sorry for the people who have to live in the

conditions they do" is "more than our responsibility or the city's. It's really everybody's."

He said the neighborhood needs some affordable housing and that with the company's role in planning a housing project there he is "just trying to help clear up a real concern in the community."

The housing deal is part of a complicated series of changes planned for the beach area and Beach Flats that would include the Seaside Co. being allowed to build a luxury hotel at the site of the La Bahia apartments on Beach Street. The housing project would serve as a home for La Bahia tenants who lost their homes because of the hotel.

The Seaside Co. also would provide land and some financing for the 52-unit low-income housing project. But the company is seeking some concessions from the city as well: It wants a city tax on arcade games lifted and it wants the city to put money into upgrading Beach Street and the surrounding area.

Laird gives Canfield "credit for being real positive" about the need for a low-income housing project for Beach Flats, but said that the Seaside Co. has "an obligation to provide replacement housing for the number of bedrooms displaced" by the La Bahia hotel and any other company development in the beach area. "The logical place to do that is in Beach Flats," he said.