

District tenants also targets for gentrification

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ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

"We must broaden District citizen's awareness about what developers and real estate investors are doing to tenants and co-op owners around the District," said [Gloria Hightower]. "But who can we trust when council members and the mayor take financial contributions from, the real estate investors you are trying to fight?" "It's important that we make the Council understand it is necessary to put in place additional legislation to protect the rights of tenants when developers and owners blatantly force them out for profit," said Hightower. "First, we must find Council members who are not bought." "The family will continue to provide safe and decent work-force housing as it always has in the District," said [Michael Huke]. "We also feel that we have been remarkably responsive to tenants' complaints for repairs and needed services."

FULL TEXT

Homeowners in the District are not the only residents faced with gentrification schemes to remove them from the city. Tenant advocates claim an unprecedented number of apartment buildings are making way for gentrification by forcing tenants to vacate.

Tenants and co-op owners in various neighborhoods targeted by gentrification said they have become the latest victims of inadequate tenant and condo conversion laws to protect their interests.

Co-op owners lose everything in condo conversion

Gloria Hightower once sat in her well decorated home, as an original co-operative member, in an apartment building located at 919 L Street, N.W., just one block from the new convention center and some of the most lucrative downtown property in the District.

It became a nuisance when huge development took place around it, she said, but the small band of co-op owners held on to their building. The Marriott Corporation approached the co-op several times to sell the property. The co-op members refused.

Eventually, the building would be sold to Marriott and the co-op owners would be displaced without making any money on the building.

"I paid less than \$700 a month for rent, plus utilities. We were awarded the building from a slum lord by the courts. The building was owned by our co-op members until June 2004 when a contract scam was employed," said Hightower.

According to Hightower, the co-op members wanted to change the building to condominiums to upgrade it while the property was facing a balloon payment that was due. The co-op members sought the advice of an attorney who entered into an alleged contract without the participation, knowledge or endorsement of the majority members.

However the new owner, a well-known tenant conversion company, The Tenacity Group, said it took over the title of the building to prevent it from going into foreclosure.

"We weren't in foreclosure," said Joyce Evans, another co-op owner.

"The balloon payment was due. We would have gotten the money, fixed the building and kept our homes. But we allege too many people, including the attorney, sold us out because it was a very lucrative property and low and moderate-income people owned it," said Hightower. "Bottom line they wanted us out to make huge profits."

Erik Bolog, managing partner of Tenacity Group, said the company went beyond the call of duty to assist the tenants in securing the condos.

"Many of the co-op owners wanted much of the profits from the building. We couldn't do that. We put millions into the building. We had nothing to share," said Bolog.

"Doesn't something seem fishy when hardly any of the people in our building refused to sign a purchase agreement contract. We were losing our most valuable asset," said Hightower.

According to Bolog, most of the tenants did not qualify to purchase because of bad credit and low income.

Tenacity officials claimed they tried to reason with the tenants before taking final drastic action.

After 15 months of negotiations, only three residents were able to purchase the condos at below market cost. A few others were sold to outside prospectors. A settlement agreement was made in mediation that the tenants would receive some compensation. However, according to Hightower, Tenacity did not honor the agreement.

"They said I breached the contract by talking to a Council member. Can you imagine? Real estate investors are that powerful that they can instruct residents not to speak with an elected official. I have problems with that," said Hightower.

Hurt and confused, Hightower, one of the most outspoken Black women in the District for human and civil rights, added her name temporarily to the list of homeless as she tried to regain her strength to fight back.

"We must broaden District citizen's awareness about what developers and real estate investors are doing to tenants and co-op owners around the District," said Hightower. "But who can we trust when council members and the mayor take financial contributions from, the real estate investors you are trying to fight?"

Bolog said Tenacity Group made financial contributions to political candidates, including providing the majority of funding for Mayor Adrian Fenty's inaugural ball.

"That's a problem for me," said Hightower.

Affordable housing advocates said variations of displacement are occurring all over the District leaving tenants with few options without strengthened laws to protect them.

Linda Leaks, co-director of Empower D.C, started an organization to address issues of people losing housing and their lack of defense.

"After the Columbia Heights Metro Station opened, we saw a tremendous change. It seemed the gentrification plan began to spin its wheels," said Leaks.

"It's important that we make the Council understand it is necessary to put in place additional legislation to protect the rights of tenants when developers and owners blatantly force them out for profit," said Hightower. "First, we must find Council members who are not bought."

Evans said she saw one other former co-op owners several weeks ago who was still looking for housing. "This is an elderly blind man. He asked me to help him find a good place to live. What happened to us is one for the books," said Evans.

Tenants force owner to abate violations

On the other side of town, tenants in a Northeast neighborhood are faced with another problem.

Vaughn Bennett resides at 2520 10th Street, N.B. He moved there six months ago. He quickly organized the tenants of the two-building complex of 99 units to force the owner to abate District housing and health code violations.

Some residents in his apartment complex believed the landlord allowed the building to deteriorate to force tenants out when they refused to move initially.

"As tenants moved out, he would completely remodel the vacant units but refused to put any money into repairs of the other apartments," he said.

According to Bennett, the tenants filed a petition with DCRA which noted over 5,000 incidents, yet did not force landlord to abate violations. After time lapsed, tenants called for a re-inspection. According to Bennett, the owner has been allowed to operate without the proper licenses for years.

"If this is a forced eviction, it disallows us our first rights of refusal to purchase the property. TMs is a racist and

class campaign that is being fostered by the Council with inadequate housing laws to protect us," said Bennett. "However, Michael Huke, chairman and CEO of CIH Properties, who represents the owners, said the family who owns the property built it in 1929 has no intention of selling the building. "The family will continue to provide safe and decent work-force housing as it always has in the District," said Huke. "We also feel that we have been remarkably responsive to tenants' complaints for repairs and needed services." Huke said they have been working with the tenants and government officials to abate all violations. Failure to abate longstanding health and housing violations has led to numerous complaints where tenants were forced to move. The history may have caused the distrust among residents, tenant advocates said. "We have definitely witnessed a trend where tenants of low and moderate income families and neighborhoods have become a target of mass gentrification," said Leaks. "There are as many stories as there are buildings in the District."

Sidebar

Co-op owners lose everything in condo conversation

The tenants of these two 95-unit apartment buildings at 2520-2524 10th St., in northeast Washington claim the owner refuses to fix major repairs to force them out so they can sell the building to developers.

Sidebar

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Sidebar

Dr. Ronald Walters, distinguished professor and political analyst, right, interviewed historian John Hope Franklin, PhD., on April 21 at the historic Lincoln Theater in Washington, D.C., where Franklin was awarded the "Here I Stand" award, named for the great Paul Robeson and conferred by The Hung Tao Choy Mei Leadership Institute. The co-op owners at 919 L Street in northwest Washington were the talk of the town before they were pushed out of their building by what many former co-op owners claim was a real estate "scam."

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