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Low-income Novato seniors rally over rent hikes

By **WILL HOUSTON** | whouston@marinij.com |

PUBLISHED: October 23, 2019 at 6:14 p.m. | UPDATED: October 23, 2019 at 7:40 p.m.

Low-income senior residents of a Novato affordable apartment complex rallied at City Hall this week to protest rent hikes they say are pricing them out of the only homes they can afford.

Sharon Wagner-Higgins is a five-year resident at The Villas at Hamilton, a 128-unit affordable senior housing complex on South Palm Drive with multiple sclerosis. Similar to other tenants on a fixed income, Wagner-Higgins said she has had to choose between her medications and affording rent. Should the rent increase again, tenants such as Wagner said they don't know what options they will have left.

"I'm going to end up on the street," Wagner-Higgins said in front of City Hall on Tuesday.

The complex owner, Affordable Housing Access, and the building manager, VPM Management, both based in Southern California, have agreed to hold a meeting with the tenants after what tenants say have been multiple requests, according to Legal Aid of Marin, which is representing the tenants along with the Marin Organizing Committee.



Both companies did not reply to requests for comment on Wednesday.

While one initial meeting with lower-level employees was held a few months ago, the companies did not respond for several months until Legal Aid of Marin sent a formal demand letter that also notified them of Tuesday's press conference, according to Legal Aid attorney Lucie Hollingsworth.

The two organizations said the tenants have experienced 13 rent increases in 16 years, including a 15% increase this year. A survey of tenants by Legal Aid of Marin found many were paying between 50% to 80% of their income on rent alone.

While the tenants and their advocates acknowledged the rent increases are legal under U.S. Housing and Urban Development regulations, they are hoping the city can help to negotiate a voluntary rent cap with the owners. The Villas at Hamilton is funded by federal low-income housing tax credits, with state regulators setting the maximum allowed rent increase that owners can charge. This rent cap is based on the median income of Marin.

"It makes no sense to tie the rents to the area median income in a place like Marin that has high income disparity," Marin Organizing Committee member Judith Bloomberg said in a statement. "These are people living on fixed incomes. They shouldn't be punished because some workers in Mill Valley and Ross are making half-a-million each year."

Any changes to the rent cap would require legislation. While Gov. Gavin Newsom recently signed a statewide rent cap under AB 1482, it does not affect affordable housing projects such as The Villas at Hamilton, advocates said.

Peter Anderson, an 11-year tenant of The Villas, said he hasn't had the best experience with the management and doesn't trust that anything will come out of the discussions. With his monthly rent increasing by \$100 this year to \$1,308, Anderson said his pension and social security payments are not enough to keep pace.

"Talk's cheap," Anderson said. "I want to see action by VPM."

Meredith Parnell, member of the Marin Organizing Committee, also was wary of the owners' agreement to sit down for talks, especially since it took months to get a response, she said.

"We'll believe it when we see it in writing," Parnell said about a rent agreement.

The tenants along with Hamilton Tenants Association president John Geoghegan stayed after the rally to address the City Council on Tuesday. Mayor Eric Lucan and Community Development Director Vicki Parker previously sat down with The Villas' owners and tenants during the first informal meeting earlier this year.



Geoghegan called on the council to keep the tenants top of mind.

“I’m here to ask the Novato City Council to continue monitoring our situation to make sure our landlord keeps their promise to meet with us and negotiate in a fair and open-minded manner,” Geoghegan told the council. “You folks have helped us in the past and we hope we can continue to count on your help in the future to ensure Novato remains age friendly for seniors.”

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Will Houston

