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TALES OF NEGLECT AT GENEVA TOWERS

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Residents tell of horrors as HUD threatens foreclosure

S.F. EXAMINER

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OF THE EXAMINER STAFF

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Tales of neglect in Geneva Towers

drop two floors, terrifying the passengers.

"You pick yourself up off the floor and make sure you're there," she said.

Another woman said she has on-

ly hot running water. To bathe her child, she said she has to fill her tub with scalding water and then wait 45 minutes for it to cool.

A friend sitting at the woman's kitchen table laughed because she said she remembered what it was like to live at the building before she moved to Sunnysdale, the nearby public-housing complex with a reputation as a drug haven.

"I love Sunnysdale. It sure beats being here. This is much worse than the projects," said Lorraine McGee, who lived at Geneva for eight years.

One 19th-floor resident pointed out mold lining the wall of a bedroom and living room. Outside her front door, she showed a scant paint job over graffiti that barely hid the unsightly writing.

Rent based on income

Although most tenants pay a third of their income to rent the two- and three-bedroom apartments, a few like the woman on the 19th floor pay market rent of \$669 for a two-bedroom unit or \$745 for a three-bedroom because of household income.

"The rent kept going up while the whole building deteriorated and went down," she said. "It's hard living here."

Burger Management has been the target of several lawsuits in re-

cent years, including one by The City for fire code violations.

'Dangerous to human life'

The April 1988 suit said the premises were a "continuing, visible public nuisance, dangerous to human life and detrimental to the comfortable enjoyment of life."

Among other things, the suit demanded that the company remove padlocks from exit doors and provide more fire hoses.

A year and a half after the suit was filed, city officials said that "major progress" had been made on safety equipment in the building. But they said the suit would not be dropped until all of the conditions were improved, including minor ones such as broken door latches. Burger officials said they hoped for a final sign-off on inspections next month.

Low rating from inspections

A HUD inspection last year gave the complex the lowest possible maintenance rating. Of 39 categories, corrections were needed in half, including guard rails, fire escapes, curtains, ranges, refrigerators, plumbing and play equipment.

An inspection report said many steps in the emergency staircase had broken, fire and emergency doors had been vandalized, dim lighting hampered security measures, torn draperies needed re-

placement and better overall maintenance of elevators was needed.

HUD Regional Director Robert De Monte received government approval to repossess Geneva Towers last year, but held off pending an agreement under which the owners promised to come up with \$2.6 million for renovations by Sept. 1. But De Monte said the money never arrived.

In response to HUD and resident complaints, Penny Tourangeau, vice president of Burger Management, acknowledged that lighting was too dim in the building, but said the 50-person staff was enough to provide adequate security and maintenance for the 2,000 residents.

She also denied tenant complaints of a backlog in maintenance orders. She said she hears only one or two complaints every six months.

Asked why it took a year and a half to correct the fire code violations outlined in The City's lawsuit, Tourangeau said many had been taken care of earlier, but that management had forgotten to get the corrections signed off by the Fire Department before they were vandalized again.

She said the company spent hundreds of thousands of dollars on elevator maintenance every year, but it wasn't enough to keep up with the vandalism.

It's not just the cockroach floating in a refrigerated pitcher of juice or crawling over her toothbrush that makes Shirley Thomson cringe when she comes home to her Geneva Towers apartment.

Exposed wires in her stove make the decrepit appliance heat up and spark even when it isn't turned on. "Sweating" walls leak puddles in her son's room when it rains.

"I've got a stove I'm afraid of," she said. "My pink walls are turning to green. I had to threaten to take them to court before I got new drapes. To be perfectly honest, I'm in a state of depression."

She isn't the only unhappy resident at the 20-story twin towers with complaints about shoddy maintenance, poor security, unresponsive management and unsafe conditions.

Distressing stories of life in Geneva Towers were told to a reporter during a recent visit to the government-subsidized, 576-unit housing complex in Visitacion Valley.

The visit followed the announcement by the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development that it wanted to repossess the property. Among other complaints, HUD said the owners had failed to come up with \$2.6 million for promised repairs.

Working to correct violations

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HUD wrote the company Oct. 13, warning that foreclosure was being sought but that the company could respond within seven days. Burger Management did respond, asking for a meeting with Washington, D.C., officials, but no date has been set.

Meanwhile, tenants — many of them single parents — dismissed the latest repair promise and offered their versions of neglect.

One woman angrily told of having to cart her infant more than 15 floors down the stairs when the elevators chronically break down. She said the elevators occasionally

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