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COMMUNITY

Public Hearing: Condo Conversions

Edited by Lucia McKelvey

Late last week What's Happening learned about an upcoming public hearing on the important issue of Condominium Conversion. It will be held on Monday, February 9 at 6 pm in the City Council Chambers.

Hoping to inform readers about this local controversy that especially affects the elderly, we asked the Coalition on Condominium Conversion for information. The following is their position paper, edited for publication, and represents the Coalition's point of view.

We hope it will stimulate questions and generate opinions and testimony at the hearing on Monday.

The recent holiday season was discomforting for several hundred older Eugene residents . . . most of them women who live alone in apartments which could be converted to condominiums for sale if the City Council accepts recommendations which were forwarded by the Planning Commission just before Christmas. The recommendations would make it possible for owners to sell apartments and evict the tenants if they didn't want or couldn't afford to buy. Many can afford the rent, but can't afford to buy.

The Planning Commission proposals would allow those evictions to take place routinely, on conversion and sale of an apartment even if there were no comparable units available. Under the present ordinance, older people, and low-income, or handicapped renters can't be moved from their apartments when their units are converted unless there are "comparable" units elsewhere. The law was enacted nearly eight years ago.

Until the City Council takes final action, older Eugeneans, especially those in three of Eugene's "high rise facilities," are wondering "how much they count," and many, unable to buy a condominium, are chronically sleepless. They thought they were protected against a forced move.

With the protection of law, those people have settled in, made plans, arranged their retirement financing, and looked forward to long-term residency without disruption. According to Gail Nicholson, a well-known Eugene widow who lives in one of the high rises that owners seek to convert, "Many of us residents came to these buildings with husbands . . . but are alone now."

All of a sudden, some apartment owners, especially of high-rise facilities, see the possibilities of substantial profits, if only the City Council will act in their behalf!

Among those apartment owners is Rob Bennett, who moved this month from membership on the Planning Commission, where he led the way and participated actively on this issue, to membership on the City Council. He, and other developers, seem to be looking for a "first-time" debate on the topic of whether or not private landowners should have "the freedom" to convert apartments to condominiums without government restraint and regardless of impact on older tenants.

That issue was debated, and decided in Eugene eight years ago when the Council voted to protect older residents from eviction and passed the "condo conversion" ordinance. The issue now is whether or not City Hall will break the promise of security which was assured older renters several years ago.

Many public bodies elsewhere have passed laws, similar to Eugene's existing ordinance, which protect certain renters against evictions caused by condo conversion. Some form of ten-

All of a sudden, some apartment owners ... see the possibilities of substantial profits.

ant protection for residents undergoing conversion has been enacted into state law by 25 state legislatures, with at least three of those states offering special protections for aged renters statewide.

The key protection in the present ordinance provides that "comparable" housing must be available if a renter is forced out of a unit that converts to a condo.

Planning Commission members could not come together on the issue of comparability and have left it, with all of its deep and troubling implications for people in high-rise facilities in particular, for City Council action.

The half-finished recommendation from the Planning Commission recommends that apartment owners be allowed to convert but, as one Commission member said, "the comparability question is at the heart of the matter and we haven't come to terms with it."

There are only three high rise, private, non-subsidized apartment buildings left in Eugene which have not converted to condominiums. If all three were allowed to convert, as many of us believe they will, there would be no comparable apartment units left in the area.

For the several hundred residents of Patterson Towers, Lane Towers, and Eugene Manor, it's hard to imagine something which is comparable to an elevator! If they're forced to move, they move to very different units. In the minds of many older, settled Eugeneans, the "elevator buildings" are their safety and security, and those are the buildings which are most likely to convert if the Council puts profit for a few above security for many.

The trauma of moving for older people is well documented by 20 years of conclusive research which indicates that involuntary relocation triggers illness and debilitation. Increased dependence on others is often the result. Costly, long-term nursing care often becomes the only alternative.

All three privately held high-rise apartments could convert to condos immediately if the Council gives the owners this option. All three are reported to have financial difficulties: re-possession, defaults, bankruptcies and sheriff's auctions characterize their recent history and present status.

How is the public to perceive the continued actions of Councilman Bennett, who has an owner's financial interest in one of those three high rise buildings?

Although the City Attorney has said that Mr. Bennett can participate in action of the Planning Commission because he doesn't plan immediate conversion, the Coalition perceives a severe conflict of interest, and is shocked by his continued participation. Our handsome City Hall and the three high rise buildings at the heart of the condo conversion discussion surely can't be described as chicken coops, but the vision of a fox at work is overpowering for those who watch. Who will the City be helping if it allows conversion of apartments to condos?

Is the public to believe that the Council is comfortable with "cozy" actions? Does the majority of the Council think that the present need to support our business community also includes specific "personal favor" votes for three friendly apartment owners? Do the people of Eugene think it's all right for the City to switch the rules and allow older persons to be evicted, or left in perpetual state of anxiety about their living unit for those reasons? Most of all: what about those broken promises?

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Publishers

Elisabeth Lyman
Lucia McKelvey
Sonja Ungemach

Editor

Lucia McKelvey

Advertising Manager

Elisabeth Lyman

Production Manager

Sonja Ungemach

Office Manager/Production

Sheri Longobardo

Assistant Editor

Deborah McGee

Cover Design

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Contributing Writers

Deborah McGee
Jim Stiak
Michael Sussman
Lois Wadsworth
Martha Wagner

Photographer

David Stein

Distribution

Daybreak News Co.

Typesetting

ProType

Camera Work

Graphics Unlimited

Printing

Springfield News

335 West 20th Avenue
Eugene, Oregon 97405
(503) 484-0519

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