

West Hotel puts new attention on relocation options

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After months of eviction and housing uncertainty for residents of the soon to be razed West Hotel, hotel owners now say the remaining tenants are safe from becoming homeless: Pat Janik, the executive director of the Macdonald Center, the agency that owns the West Hotel, said that the tenants will be allowed to stay through December until new housing has been secured.

And because they are on track to either move into housing within the next couple weeks, or applications are pending, that applies, as far as Street Roots understands, to all of the tenants.

The fact that no one living at the West Hotel will face an eviction and become homeless is a far different story than what Street Roots was hearing a month ago (see "Time's up at the West"). With only a month left before their eviction date, nearly half of the 27 tenants — all with high barriers to housing — had found no new place to call home. Nor were they assured any housing at the West past the Dec. 1 eviction deadline.

That is no longer the case. But the question of whether a similar situation could arise in the future still remains.

Some housing advocates, most prominently Northwest Pilot Project's housing consultant Bobby Weinstock, having begun calling for the city to develop a relocation policy. Such a policy would mandate that any housing agency using local money in an affordable housing project that might displace tenants provide relocation services for those tenants.

Essentially, the goal of such a policy would be to prevent people from becoming homeless.

Street Roots' previous story about the West quoted Portland Housing Bureau director Margaret Van Vliet as saying that the Housing Bureau would not create a policy that mandated agencies receiving city funding to pay for the relocation of their residents.

Van Vliet's reason for not doing so is that relocation is too costly. However, more recently, Van Vliet and the Housing Bureau has indicated it will be looking at possible ways to create better relocation protections. Studies on the cost of relocation estimate that the cost per person — including moving,

security deposits and related fees, would be between \$3,500 to \$4,000, or about \$100,000 for all the residents of the West Hotel: By comparison far less than if the residents cycled into the system of homeless shelters, jail, hospitals and mental health facilities.

In Portland's case, the only time an agency is mandated to provide relocation services to displaced tenants is when housing developers receive federal money — either Community Development Block Grant funds and HOME investment funds. They are then legally required by the Uniform Relocation Assistance and Real Property Acquisition Act (also known as the "Uniform Relocation Act") to provide relocation services to tenants, including paying for their relocation and moving costs.

The law was passed by Congress in 1970, and in essence, aims to prevent people from becoming homeless through development.

Several major cities across the country go beyond the Uniform Relocation Act and require agencies and developers to provide relocation services if local funds are used. The state of California requires developers to provide relocation services on any project that displaces residents using state funds. Relocation services that will be paid for by the developer are folded into their development plan for the housing project, which means the state pays for relocation.

Brittany Batong, who oversees the compliance of federal and state relocation laws for the City of Los Angeles' Housing Department, says their program closely mirrors the Uniform Relocation Act.

The City of Los Angeles also has a Rent Stabilization Ordinance. The main thrust of the ordinance is to control rent in the city. But it also mandates that a landlord pay tenants a "relocation benefit" if they are evicted from their home because it is being demolished, rehabbed, converted to condominiums, or for another reason not bad practices on the part of the tenant.

"That's paid by the developer, or the landlord, or whoever it is that is issuing the notice to vacate," Batong says.

The amount that is paid is re-calculated every year, and several factors are considered: how long the tenant has lived there, whether they are elderly, disabled, have minor children

living with them, and their income. Their income must fall below 80 percent of median family income. In Los Angeles, that amount for one individual is \$44,400. In Oregon it is \$34,200. An individual who is not elderly, disabled, or have minor children, lived at their residence for more than three years, and

Wendy Derobbio says the agency's relocation plan, as represented in the development plan, is an important factor when deciding whether to give development dollars to that agency.

"They have to let us know if there is any possible relocation on the site," Derobbio

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— BRITTANY BATONG
THE CITY OF LOS ANGELES' HOUSING DEPARTMENT.

earned less than 80 percent of MFI would be given \$9,650. An individual who is elderly, disabled, or have minor children would be given \$18,300.

Batong says that money is simply paid out to the tenants. It is not monitored or tracked in anyway. "It's just assumed it will be utilized toward their rent," she says.

That is not the case with relocations involving California state dollars. Tenants receive a rental assistance payment that is explicitly to be used for moving costs, including security deposits, application fees, a moving truck, and other related moving expenses.

The result of having state and local laws mandating relocation is that the pains, stress and emotions of moving are relieved for many people, and very few people become homeless.

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"For the most part, there's not a lot of situations where folks aren't going to be entitled to some kind of relocation benefit."

Washington's King County, where the city of Seattle is located, provides \$2,700 to displaced individuals if local dollars are used. Those dollars must be used for the costs of moving and relocation. It is paid by the agency issuing the eviction, and the total cost of relocation is included in the agency's initial development plan that is submitted to King County.

says. "They would definitely have to provide the information of any and all displaced households. They have to give us a list of current tenants. We know at the time when we're deciding whether we're going to award them enough (for relocation).

San Francisco has a Relocations Appeal Board that is staffed by the city and county. It was founded in 1967, and it is a resource for individuals and businesses who are displaced from their homes or place of business. Its purpose is to hear disputes between displaced persons who are dissatisfied with the relocation services provided to them by the agency responsible for providing relocation services. The Appeals Board has the power and authority to demand further action from the relocation agency if it finds the relocation services were inadequate.

"We provide the maximum amount of relocation assistance permitted by law, and we enforce it diligently," says Eugene Flannery, the Appeals Board Secretary.

Bobby Weinstock says he submitted a proposal to develop a relocation policy to the Portland Housing Bureau as part of the Bureau's ongoing process to develop a strategic plan for the future. He says it is necessary for the Housing Bureau to have such a policy.

"We can't be funding homelessness at the same time that we're trying to end homelessness," Weinstock says.



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