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Joliet sued over plans to raze complex

Tenants say efforts to condemn site are discriminatory

By Hal Dardick

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Six tenants of Joliet's federally subsidized Evergreen Terrace apartment complex allege in a federal lawsuit that a city effort to condemn the property is discriminatory and unconstitutional.

The tenants, backed by the Chicago Rehab Network and represented by the Sargent Shriver National Center on Poverty Law, also have asked to intervene in Joliet's pending condemnation lawsuit.

The complex "sits at the center of activity in Joliet," states the tenants' lawsuit, filed Dec. 21. "It is for that very reason that the City of Joliet seeks to get rid of Evergreen Terrace and its low-income residents."

Noting most of the 579 tenants in the 356-unit complex are black women and children, the suit accuses the city of a "pattern and practice of discrimination against African-Americans, females and families." The city "deceivingly portrayed Evergreen Terrace as crime-ridden, unsafe, unsanitary and unhealthy," it states.

Joliet Corporation Counsel Jeff Plyman, however, said the suit "raises the same issues" as one filed in 2005 by the complex's owners, who have accused city officials of waging "a campaign of harassment, political influence and deception to force Evergreen Terrace and its low-income residents out of Joliet."

Katherine Walz, an attorney with the poverty law center, said the suit brings tenants into the debate.

"I think for the first time since this whole mess and litigation started, the tenants are being heard," she said. "The tenants could permanently lose their housing."

Plyman said the city is not trying to displace blacks and has not exaggerated problems at the complex.

"Everyone in Joliet understands how bad the conditions have been at Evergreen Terrace," he said. "We want to fix the problem."

The city seeks to acquire the property through condemnation and convert it into a mixed-use development with fewer subsidized units. Opponents, however, say there's not enough subsidized housing in the area for displaced residents.

Six-year tenant Teresa Davis, 26, who has four children, said she feels safe living at the complex and believes the owners, who recently received U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development refinancing, are working "as swiftly as they can" to fix up the property.

"I feel this property in general is very important to mothers, young men and elderly folks," said Davis, who is one of the plaintiffs of the lawsuit.

"The majority, if not all, are pretty OK with where they are at right now."

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