

THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 29, 2016

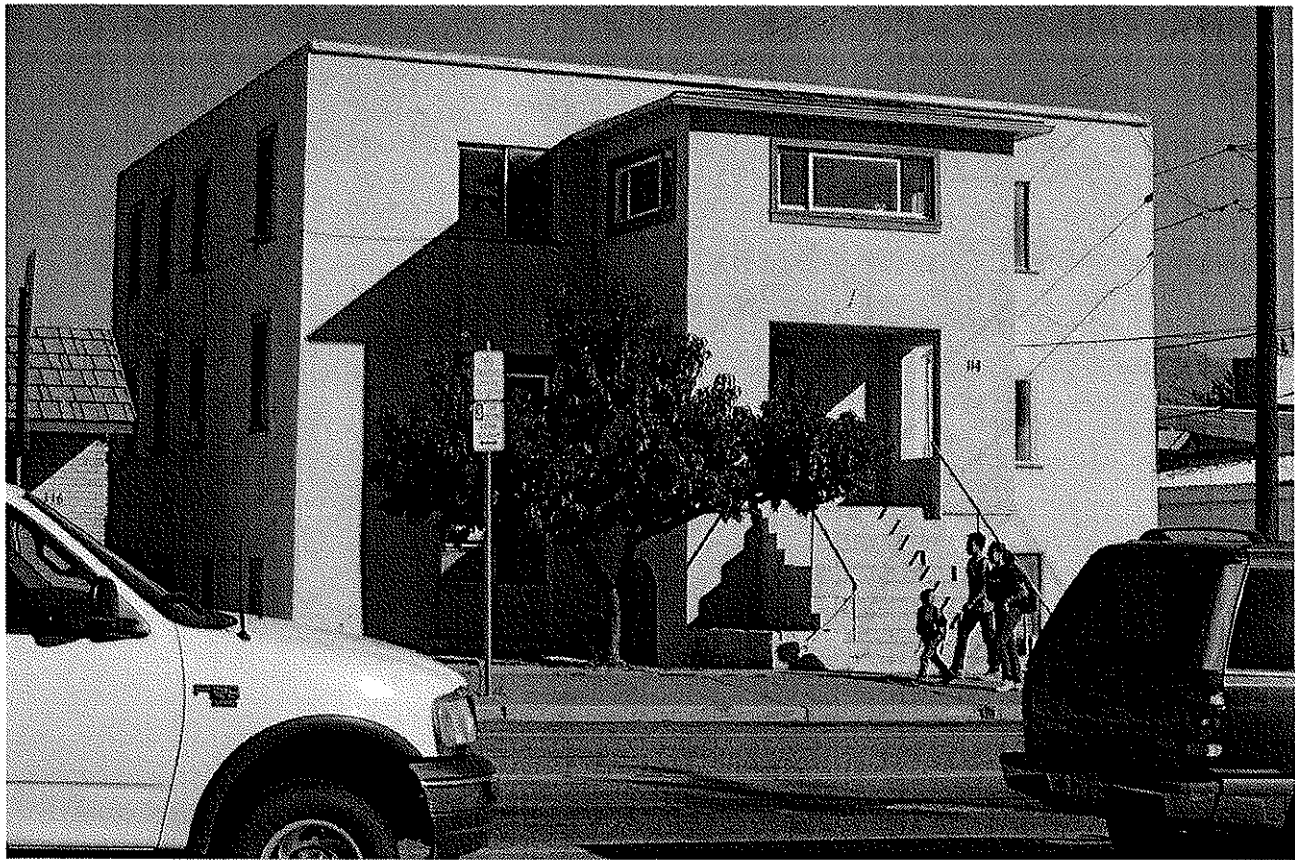


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Tenants displaced from decrepit Chelan apartment building

by Christine Pratt | Sept. 29, 2016, 8:41 a.m.
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The apartment building at 114 Sanders St. in Chelan is being called unfit for human occupancy by the city but the remaining tenants are having a hard time finding other housing they can afford.

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CHELAN — The few tenants who still remain in a decrepit, downtown apartment building that the city has declared “preliminarily... unfit for human occupancy” are having a hard time finding other housing they can afford.

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The building at 114 Sanders St. is barely a block off the city’s upscale Woodin Avenue commercial district. It’s a quick walk to school, to a health clinic, to area employers and the Lake Chelan shoreline, yet it is best known locally for its deteriorating state and illegal drug deals.





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"You can't find a worse condition in our city," Chelan Mayor Mike Cooney says of the building. "Unsavoury activity was going on around the apartments. We would all drive by it knowing it wasn't a great situation. I feel strongly that we are doing the right thing. These people will end up in a better place."

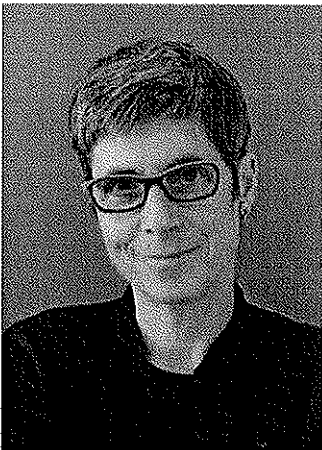


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Threatened with condemnation by the city, property owner John Fragnito III has obliged the approximately 13 families and individuals who lived there to find homes elsewhere.

Cooney says Fragnito is "making some relocation funding available" to tenants and intends to repair and remodel the building to create fewer but larger units.

The tenants' relocation effort comes at a time when a scarcity of rentals for people on low to middle incomes has driven rent prices up all over North Central Washington.



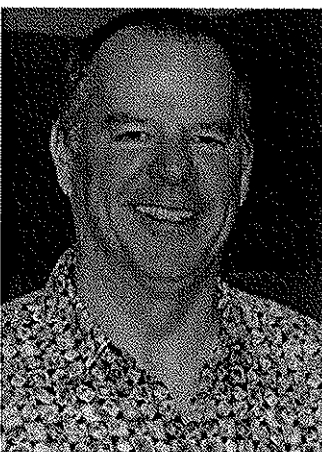
New rent levels at Fragnito's revamped building will likely top the approximately \$250 to \$500 per month the tenants had been paying, Cooney said.

But the city is also sending a message that "affordable" housing can't come in the form of a cheap, dilapidated dump.

"Affordable housing is great to talk about in theory," Cooney said. "But it needs to be managed, safe and have no illegal activity."

Cooney credits Fragnito with working to help relocate each tenant and launch long-awaited work to improve the property. Other area agencies, including local charitable organizations, also offered support.

Fragnito declined to comment for this report on the advice of his attorney, but said he would in the future.

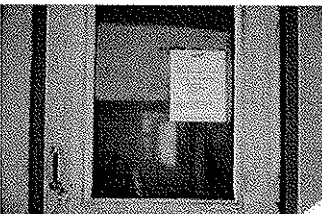


Officials from the Lake Chelan School District visited families in the building after noting that children who lived there missed class, earned lower grades and had parents who were hard to reach by phone, Sarah Barnes, a district "school and community liaison," said Thursday.

During their visits they observed the building's dilapidated state and heard the mothers' stories about life there. The school officials informed the school district superintendent, the city and the Chelan County sheriff, Barnes said.

The school district qualified the affected students "homeless" to entitle them to additional benefits under a federal act, city records show.

A June 16 inspection revealed bug infestations, broken windows, excessive dirt, trash and debris, exposed wiring, leaky plumbing, holes in floors and ceilings, no fire extinguishers or smoke detectors and no locks on doors, including the door to a communal bathroom where the sink was missing and shower was in poor repair.



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On Aug. 17, the city issued a "correction order" giving Fragnito until Nov. 17, to repair 10 pages of code violations. The city had cited that same building for similar violations in February 2007, December 2008 and October 2010, records show.

According to the order, failure to correct the violations would result in the city condemning the building.

This means Fragnito could be required by state law to pay relocation aid to displaced tenants, city records show. He could also face fines and reimbursement payments if the city contracts to

have the violations corrected.

County assessor's records show Fragnito bought the building in 2004 from Dionne Simons and agreed by contract to make monthly payments directly to her. In 2007, Fragnito sold the building to Blue Fusion Concepts LLC but agreed to continue paying Simons. Blue Fusion is now an inactive corporation.

Blue Concepts defaulted on its payments and the property ended up in a trustee sale, the records show. Fragnito bought it back in 2012.

Lawyers from the Northwest Justice Project, a legal-aid nonprofit, represent tenants in four of the units, including one family still there and unable to find an affordable place to move.

The state of the building has created a perception around town that its tenants were dirty, uncaring of their environment, and drug users.

Judith Lurie, one of the Justice Project's lawyers on the case, insists that wasn't true of the tenants she represents.

"Our clients are hard-working people, including farmworkers, dishwashers and cooks," Lurie said. "The families we represent include a single farmworker mother of three children, including a student at Eastern Washington University who was recently forced to drop out of college to come home to help her family."

She added, "People ask, 'Why didn't they leave?' Not one of (our) clients wanted to live in those apartments. People can't leave when there is no place to go. The lack of affordable housing in Chelan and Douglas counties creates the kind of desperation that keeps people living in these conditions."

One tenant who was home Monday agreed to comment, but declined to give her name or be photographed. She was in the process of moving to a rental home on the outskirts of Chelan. She said Fragnito was helping her financially with the move, but didn't know how much, since Fragnito made the arrangements directly with her son, who speaks English.

She said she'd been living there since 2007 and raised four children there. She said she'd heard of drug activity there, but didn't get involved with it. She, like many tenants, sprayed chemical killers in an attempt to control the bugs.

"I know this place is small and ugly, but it was my home," she said. "I'm sorry to be leaving."

"To me, the whole situation is heartbreaking and very indicative of poverty," said Sarah Barns, the school district community liaison who made multiple visits to tenant families. "I believe it's a waste of energy to worry about what the landlord did or didn't do, because many of these tenants were behind on their rent. And with our housing shortage, particularly at that level, that building was meeting a need for a very vulnerable segment of our population. At the same time, we had very serious concerns about the health, safety and well-being of our students."

Owners of businesses in a neat, mini strip mall just north of the apartment building said Monday they worried for the welfare of the children who lived in the building, but agreed that most of the tenants were good people. No one caused them any trouble.

Julie Hendrickson, owner of Jewels Hair & Nails, said she and her neighboring business owners paid one of the tenants to shovel snow off their sidewalks and keep their back parking lot free of weeds.

"He really spiffed it up around here," she said. "He was a very hard worker, but you knew he was on drugs."

She said the man eventually lost his unit in the building and attempted to live in a lean-to he built against one of its exterior walls. A sheriff's deputy made him take it down.

"I feel bad for the people, but anywhere they go would be better than here," said Sandy Francis, owner of Sassy's Soda Fountain and Deli. "I feel really bad for the children."

In a building where many tenants didn't speak English, didn't know their rights as tenants, can't afford to live anywhere else and, in some cases, weren't legal U.S. residents, aid workers say they aren't surprised the tenants, themselves, didn't complain of the conditions directly to the city.

Sharon Lukacs, executive director of the Chelan Valley Hope aid agency and food bank, was involved in community discussions about the plight of the building and how to help its tenants.

"The tenants there were very low-income seasonal workers," she said. "Some of them didn't have their legal status. They don't complain. They're just glad to have a roof over their head."

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