

I can't sleep'

San Mateo tenants see rent increases despite roach, bedbug infestation

By Samantha Weigel Daily Journal staff

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People gather outside a San Mateo apartment complex where the tenants say they've received steep rent increases despite their homes being infested with cockroaches, bedbugs and mold.

Andrea Laue/Daily Journal

Holding handmade posters highlighting health concerns, members of the community gathered outside a San Mateo apartment building in support of tenants who say they're facing steep rent increases despite their homes being infested with cockroaches, bedbugs and mold.

Kenneth Centeno. Son of Jose Centeno, who spoke at the demonstration.

Andrea K Laue

While the landlord says he's working on the issues, the housing crisis is heightening demand on the rental market and tenants at 314 E. Poplar Ave. say they're fed up with the unsafe conditions in which they've been residing. Jose Centeno, who lives with his 11-year-old son, said he will soon be expected to pay \$3,200 a month for a small two-bedroom apartment that's become a health hazard.

"Every night I cry, I can't sleep because we have so many bugs, we have bedbugs, cucarachas (cockroaches), rats. So many stuff, very, very horrible," Centeno said before Thursday's prayer vigil outside the building in which he lives. "The neighbors are scared right now, too scared to complain."

Aside from being overrun with bugs, Centeno said his apartment also has mold and there's a hole in his bathroom ceiling. He said he worries about his health, as well as that of his son who has asthma.

The city has taken notice since conditions at the 17-unit, two-story building came to light. Officials with San Mateo's code enforcement and fire department were scheduled to inspect the building Thursday, the results of which weren't immediately available.

Attorney Wayne McFadden, who was Foster City's first mayor, said he's owned the two-story Poplar Arms Apartments in San Mateo for over 40 years. McFadden said he's tried a variety of things to deal with the infestations since he first became aware, including providing tenants with insecticide and mattress covers to suffocate the bugs. After learning more about bedbugs, he said he's in the process of spending \$25,000 to have a company "heat" treat the entire building.

"I want people to have a good home, this is their home, this isn't just an apartment. This is their home, that's the way I look at it," McFadden said.

When asked about the rent increases he issued while tenants were living in unsanitary conditions, McFadden said he believed his units were still renting below market and cited a San Francisco Examiner article claiming the average one-bedroom goes for \$3,000 per month.

According to data from San Mateo County, the average one-bedroom rents for \$2,735 per month.

Attorney René Alejandro Ortega said it's unethical for a landlord to be levying steep rent increases while clearly failing to address unsafe housing conditions. Representing Centeno with **Community Legal Service of East Palo Alto**, Ortega said they hope to shed light on the deplorable conditions in which these families are living.

"On one occasion, they pulled back a picture frame off the wall and cockroaches just scattered all over the place," Ortega said. "This is just an example of what landlords feel they can get away with because there are no tenant protections."

The challenges these 16 families are facing isn't just a case of one "bad apple," it's indicative of a larger problem, said Ortega and representatives with the nonprofit Faith in Action Bay Area. Several families at the building have reportedly received rent increase of close to \$1,000 a year, getting hit with hikes every six months. In Centeno's case, it appears his increase corresponded to him raising concerns about the unsafe housing conditions, Ortega said.

McFadden countered he offers lower rent increases if they sign a year lease as he too wants the stability of knowing tenants will remain, however, he said turnover at the property is infrequent. He also said he's spent over \$100,000 on repairs over the last year.

The one thing both sides seem to agree on, even McFadden, is it appears tenants may be too fearful to speak up about issues.

Ortega said his client has been afraid to speak up and this case is particularly striking as residents' are being asked to pay more to live in homes are infested with bugs.

"In this case, these rent increases have come without there being any sort of maintenance done at all and in fact, for those tenants that have spoken up about these conditions, they've been served with rent increases more frequently," Ortega said.

Vice Mayor Rick Bonilla recently visited the building and said he was shocked by what tenants were paying for, adding the vigil was about the community rallying together.

"The issues are basic common decency. The condition that property is kept in is just deplorable," Bonilla said. "These people are afraid to raise concerns because they don't want to lose their already very expensive place they have. But to live that way and pay \$2,700 for a dinky two-bedroom, it's a lot."

But 40-year-old Centeno, who works in construction, said he's not sure he can afford much else, or to leave the place he's lived for the last six years. **CLSEPA** and Faith in Action are highlighting cases like Centeno's to advocated for tenant protection measures such as rent control and just cause eviction laws.

Yet over the last few years — which included an extremely divisive election on a failed citizens' initiative — both the City Council and voters have rejected the prospect in San Mateo.

Others have tried less controversial methods. For example, San Mateo County recently approved an ordinance aimed at encouraging landlords to maintain their properties. In unincorporated areas of the county, landlords are required to pay relocation assistance to tenants who must leave a property that's been deemed uninhabitable.

McFadden, a member of the California Apartment Association — which along with a local Realtor group raised over \$1 million to defeat two citizens' initiatives in San Mateo County —

said provisions like rent control work haven't worked in other cities. He said having rental rates restricted could deter property maintenance and make being a landlord too costly.

But Centeno, who's worried about his asthmatic son and noted there are probably two dozen kids who live in the building, said he hasn't seen his rent go toward making 314 E. Poplar Ave. any safer.

"It's very bad, it's very bad," Centeno said. "My point is why is he hiking the rent every six months, every year, [when] he doesn't want to spend any money on the apartment?"