

Oak Park tenants invest in housing

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By Laura Counts (*Oakland Tribune*)

STAFF WRITER

OAKLAND—When residents of the dilapidated Oak Park Apartments in the San Antonio neighborhood won a \$1 million cash settlement last October, it wasn't the end of the story.

Instead of taking their money and finding better living accommodations, the multi-cultural group of tenants built an even tighter community, and some are now helping to fix up the rest of the neighborhood.

While they wait for the nonprofit developers who purchased the property from its delinquent owner to do a complete renovation, organizers of the tenant group are working with teen-agers from the building on community service projects, such as wiping out graffiti and restoring gardens.

Many of the families have used the \$20,000 they each got from the settlement toward their housing, paying a year's worth of rent in advance. The tenants who organized the group used their portion for a down payment on a house next to Oak Park. They plan to raise it above its foundation, allowing the current tenants to stay upstairs and building a daycare center for Oak Park underneath.

Last week, County Supervisor Alice Lai-Bitker presented the youth service group with a \$40,000 check from the social service department's Partnership Grant Program to help with the daycare center and an after-school tutoring program. The East Bay Community Foundation also sponsors the youth group.

"Now that they have more pride in their home, we are working to develop more pride in their community," said Russell Jeung, a sociology professor at Foothill College who has been living in the building for nine years, helping the tenants fight for improvements.

It has been a long fight. Jeung and his roommate, Dan Schmitz, helped organize 200 tenants and former tenants to sue the building's owners in May 1998. Despite repeated promises of repairs throughout the litigation process, little was done to fix the mildewing apartments, the crumbling staircases, leaky roof, sewage backups and vermin infestations.

The tenants, mostly Cambodian refugees, Mexican immigrants and a few young people involved in the Harbor House Christian ministry, were wary at first. Many of them have large families living in one-bedroom apartments, which many landlords would not allow.

By spring 1999, the city had stepped in to try to force the owners to clean up Oak Park. After the owners filed bankruptcy, the city, the mortgage lender and tenants worked together to push the case through bankruptcy court.

The complicated case ended in the cash settlement, plus a \$2.2 million loan from the city spearheaded by Council President Ignacio De La Fuente (San Antonio-Fruitvale). The loan helped Affordable Housing Associates and the East Bay Asian Local Development Corporation (EBALDC) buy the building.

Local tenant lawyers said it was one of the largest settlements they had seen, and what made it more unusual was the fact that the tenants were able to stay.

Some changes are already evident at the 56-unit complex at 2618 E. 16th St. A fresh coat of light green paint has brightened up the formerly dirty beige exterior, and residents have fresh carpets and interior paint, new stoves and appliances.

Renovation plans

More substantial changes are still to come. EBALDC is expecting a decision by September on whether it will receive \$4.5 million in state low-income tax credits to complete a major renovation, said fund development director Byron Johnson.

Most of the small one-bedroom units would be turned into 3- and 4-bedroom units with two bathrooms, spacious enough to accommodate the large families at Oak Park. Many of the Mexican immigrants and Cambodian refugees living in the building have now have some family members sleeping on the floor.

Because of the expansion, the 56 units will be reduced to about 30, but since many are now empty, everyone will be accommodated. Work will start next spring and be completed by fall 2002, Johnson said.

A peaked roof will replace the flat roof to give the building more of a “townhouse” appearance. More importantly, a spacious tenant activity room will be built in one of the parking lots, and enough room will be left for a basketball court.

Landscaped courtyard

Grass and landscaping will be added to the central dirt-and-concrete courtyard, where swarms of children are always at play. It’s that courtyard that is an asset to many of the residents.

Chhorvy Thoeng and husband Yan Bun had to move from their moldy Oak Park apartment last year because three of their five developed serious asthma.

Now the family is back, in a newly painted apartment, awaiting their chance to move in to a 3-bedroom unit after the renovation. “It is so hard to find a place where children can play,” said Thoeng, who explained the family had to stay in a friend’s living room because they couldn’t find a place of their own.

Marcia Emerson, who manages the building for EBALDC, said coincidentally she had lived at Oak Park as a newlywed in 1970. Back then there was a pool in the courtyard, which is now covered with a concrete slab.

“It’s a challenging position, being here,” she said. “But we are making progress. A lot of people are sleeping on floors, so we put in new rugs. We have exterminators coming twice a month to deal with pest control.”

Meanwhile, teen-agers from the building are working with Schmitz and Jeung on other projects. They have been fixing up the garden at the Centro Infantil daycare center down the street, and are on an anti-graffiti campaign.

Sakun Kong, 17, and Veasna Ourm, 16, help with tutoring in the after-school program. They said graffiti is almost nonexistent in the neighborhood now.

“We painted it over,” Kong said. “Now everyone is watching out, we’ve got old folks watching out, to keep it from coming back.”