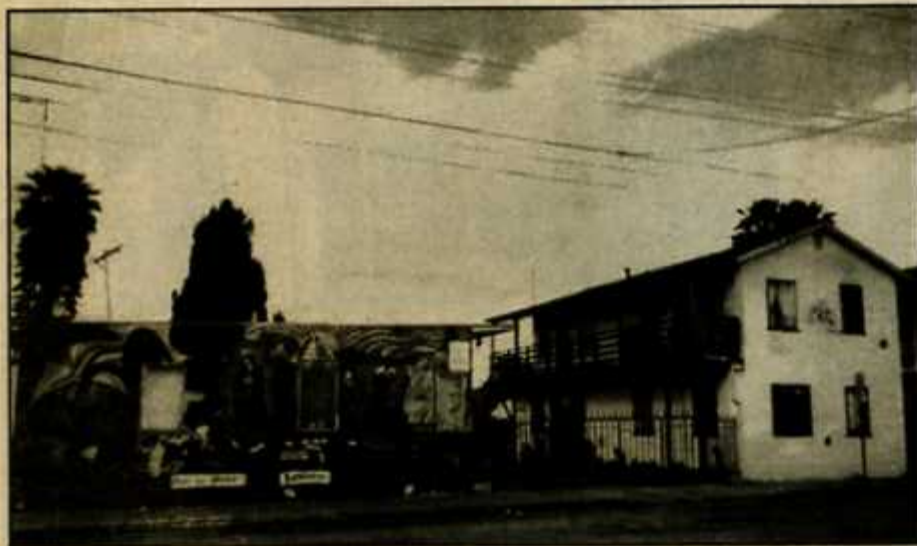


Taking a Stand Against the Bulldozers and Evictors

In Santa Cruz, *Residentes Unidos* Have United to Fight Plans to Demolish Their Homes



This low-income housing in Santa Cruz is targeted for demolition. Alene Smith photo



Homeless people sleep on a rainy night under the front entrance of the Santa Cruz post office. Santa Cruz has some of the highest housing costs in the nation, and tenants facing relocation fear they won't be able to find new housing. Alene Smith photo

No one wants to become homeless so others can have nice homes.

by Becky Johnson

Low-income Latino tenants have mobilized over the last several months to save their homes in the Dolphin and the Lee Apartments, now threatened with demolition by the redevelopment plans of the City of Santa Cruz. Concerns about the proposed demolition and rebuilding are many and varied. First, there is a net loss of housing units: 63 currently affordable units will be destroyed to make way for only 48 new units. From \$2 million to \$5 million in relocation costs could occur. More than 200 Spanish-speaking people will be displaced from their modest Beach Flats homes in a city which has the second highest housing costs in the nation.

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The developer chosen by the City to tear down the Dolphin and Lee Apartments and relocate all the residents, Mercy Charities Housing of California (MCH), is a Catholic nonprofit housing agency. Despite its name, MCH provides no funding for housing projects, but instead puts together packages of public funding from federal, state, and local sources. In the case of the Dolphin-Lee Project, five years of redevelopment funds will be used to fulfill the City's obligation to build affordable housing with those funds. MCH is the sole developer of affordable housing for the City of Santa Cruz. The project was never put out for competitive bidding. When it is built, MCH will manage it. When it is all paid for, MCH will own it.

A recent meeting of the Mercy Charities Advisory Committee was held in the (locked) community room at the Neary Lagoon Housing Cooperative. There, taped inside the glass, was a notice from "The Management." The management at Neary Lagoon, Sycamore Commons, and for the proposed Dolphin-Lee Project is Mercy Charities Housing. The note on the glass boasted, "Our complex is one of the best looking in the area." But it also gave a dire warning of a situation that required interference by the management to maintain order and protect public safety. Gangs? Drug dealers? Child molesters?

No. The problem is tricycles! And roller skates. And skateboards, bicycles, roller blades, and presumably baby strollers. The management decided that these "devices with wheels" must be banned from the sidewalks, the parking lots, and the entire grounds. In fact, only wheelchairs are exempted from the ban.

The management's notice warned that "failure to follow the new policy could result in termination of tenancy." Use a

tricycle, lose your home! I wondered what other wonders were in store for the residents of the Dolphin and Lee Apartments.

Many residents of the Dolphin and the Lee Apartments have had enough of MCH. At meetings held to discuss the plan to demolish their housing and relocate all tenants, residents were spoken to like children: simple concepts conveyed in simple words. Don't worry, MCH staff members told them. We will move you into new housing while we bulldoze your homes. We will build new homes on the bones of your former homes. You will move back into clean, upscale, stylish and Anglo-appearing homes. No problem. Trust us. We will be your new landlords. Forever. The end. But it wasn't the end. Instead, the tenants organized.

"We like living this way," said Nena Ruiz of *Residentes Unidos*, the tenant organization of the people of the Dolphin and the Lee Apartments. "Maybe it's not what you're used to. We like living with our cousins." In one apartment, two beds were in the bedroom and one in the tiny living room. Three unrelated men live there, working full time, and sending two-thirds of what they earn back to Mexico to support their families there. These men will have too high a combined income to qualify for the new homes.

MAYOR SUGAR INSULTS TENANTS

"Squalid conditions," charged both Mayor Keith Sugar and an editorial in the *Santa Cruz County Sentinel*. Mayor Sugar said to the Latino residents: "If you want to go back to Mexico and live like that, well that's fine. But here in the United States we have different standards." Sugar told the shocked tenants that he'd been to their apartments and "they're jammed in like sardines; they're filthy," adding, "if you want to live in squalor..."

Residentes Unidos have united to force the City to suspend their plan to destroy their homes. Tenants at the Lee Apartments have refused to give information to the Redevelopment Agency of their family size or income information. Without that information, the City cannot make a replacement housing plan. Without a replacement housing plan, the City may not legally acquire the property.

Vernon Lee, owner of the Lee Apartments, has been accused of being a slumlord. In late June, Nena Ruiz announced at a press conference that Lee had agreed to freeze rents for the rest of the year and not sell the property to anyone for three months to give tenants and the city a chance to negotiate. The tenants have asked that the promises of relocation money and new housing to return to be put into legal contracts obligating the City to deliver.

"When we first looked at the eligibility requirements for the new Mercy Charities housing, only two of our 16 households would have qualified," said Nena Ruiz.

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Instead of debating the long-requested guarantees for relocation and return, the City Council has stepped up the pressure on owners and tenants to allow building inspectors into the Lee Apartments and Redevelopment Agency staff to have private conversations with tenants.

"Not a good idea," remarked local redevelopment attorney Reid Schantz. "Undocumented workers can be intimidated and building inspectors can suddenly find surprise code violations. Eminent-domaining the property can follow."

BURDENSOME REGULATIONS

In light of the written notice banning all "devices with wheels" at one MCH project, I decided to investigate what kind of regulations were imposed on the tenants of other MCH developments.

According to a copy of the rules for another MCH-run housing project in Santa Cruz, posters can only be placed in the window of a MCH apartment during election time. (Do the posters have to be about the election? What happened to the First Amendment?) Rugs or blankets may not be hung over the balcony. Bicycles may not be parked in front of the units. Bicycles may only be parked at authorized bike-racks, which are remotely placed from the units. "The first night they made me park my bike over there, I came out to ride it and found both wheels had been stolen," complained one woman.

Only white or off-white curtains or venetian blinds are allowed facing outward. White sheer drapes are allowed. All windows must have white facing outwards only. "You can't hang a Mexican flag in the window of a MCH apartment," said Scott Graham.

Back at the Dolphin Apartments, I looked at the women walking back from the cantina with their groceries for dinner that night, their small girls tagging along wearing perfectly clean dresses, matching socks and polished shoes. I listened as the sounds of Mariachi music drifted into the evening air, and I tried to imagine these people in three years walking up cement sidewalks, through manicured lawns with standardized landscaping, to identical, contemporary buildings which look exactly like any other apartment complex throughout the white neighborhoods of Santa Cruz. No one driving by will be able to tell that Mexicans and Salvadorans live there. Maybe that has been an underlying motive for the plan all along.

Critics of MCH charge that the organization is administratively top-heavy. "One private developer just had his apartment

complex approved for construction. He claimed each two-bedroom unit would be constructed for \$170,000 per unit," said Graham. "An identical unit constructed by Mercy costs \$260,000, mostly due to high administrative costs."

"I don't like the design," said Angelica Martinez of the Dolphin Apartments. "It looks like a prison." Others complain that the entry requirements are too stringent. "I applied for housing at Sycamore Commons," one woman said through a translator. "They said they would give us an apartment, but that my teenage son would not be allowed to live with us." "Mercy runs these places like minimum-security prisons," said Graham.

SCAN VOTE BACKS THE TENANTS

The Santa Cruz Action Network (SCAN), a powerful local political organization, voted on May 31 at their general meeting to back the demands of *Residentes Unidos* for relocation and return guarantees. "They also voted to build enough apartments to house the 70 to 100 families in the Dolphin and the Lee Apartments," said Ruiz.

Ruiz has had to hang tough, as proponents of the project have accused her of speaking for the landlord and not the tenants. "Vernon Lee was married to my grandmother eight years ago," she explains.

When Councilmember Tim Fitzmaurice, who solidly backs MCH's proposed rebuilding, appeared on the local television show "Voices from the Village," host Joe Grossman quizzed Fitzmaurice's claims that the present housing is not well-maintained. "Just which outstanding code violations exist, how long have they existed, and how much would it cost to repair them?" he asked. Fitzmaurice was unable to answer.

Neither the Dolphin nor the Lee are red-tagged or yellow-tagged by city housing inspectors. Inspection reports going back five years, which are publicly available, do not document any serious existing code violations. MCH claims it has a study of "complaints" about the Dolphin, but has refused to release the full 1997 report, as well as much other documentation sought by tenants. No study has been done to determine the habitability of the apartments. Yet bulldozing the apartments appears to be the main goal of the plan.

"They want to bulldoze our homes because they painted the building blue," one small boy told his mother. His answer makes as much sense as any.

Contact *Residentes Unidos* at (831) 466-9520 or by e-mail at residentesunidos@hotmail.com. Bilingual meetings are held each Friday at 124 Liebrandt St. in the Lee garage.

Taking a stand
(cont.)
2

August 2000