

THE Daily News

THURSDAY, 06/25/09

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FREE

SUBSIDIZED HOUSING DETERIORATING QUICKLY

By Jessica Bernstein-Wax, Daily News staff writer

An East Palo Alto subsidized housing development that opened to much fanfare in 2006 has been plagued by problems, including urine-soaked carpeting, smashed windows and lights, and building access issues that some tenants attribute to poor management and inadequate security.

Community Housing Developers Inc., a San Jose-based affordable housing developer, says it has worked to correct complaints but is struggling to keep up with constant vandalism perpetrated by tenants and others.

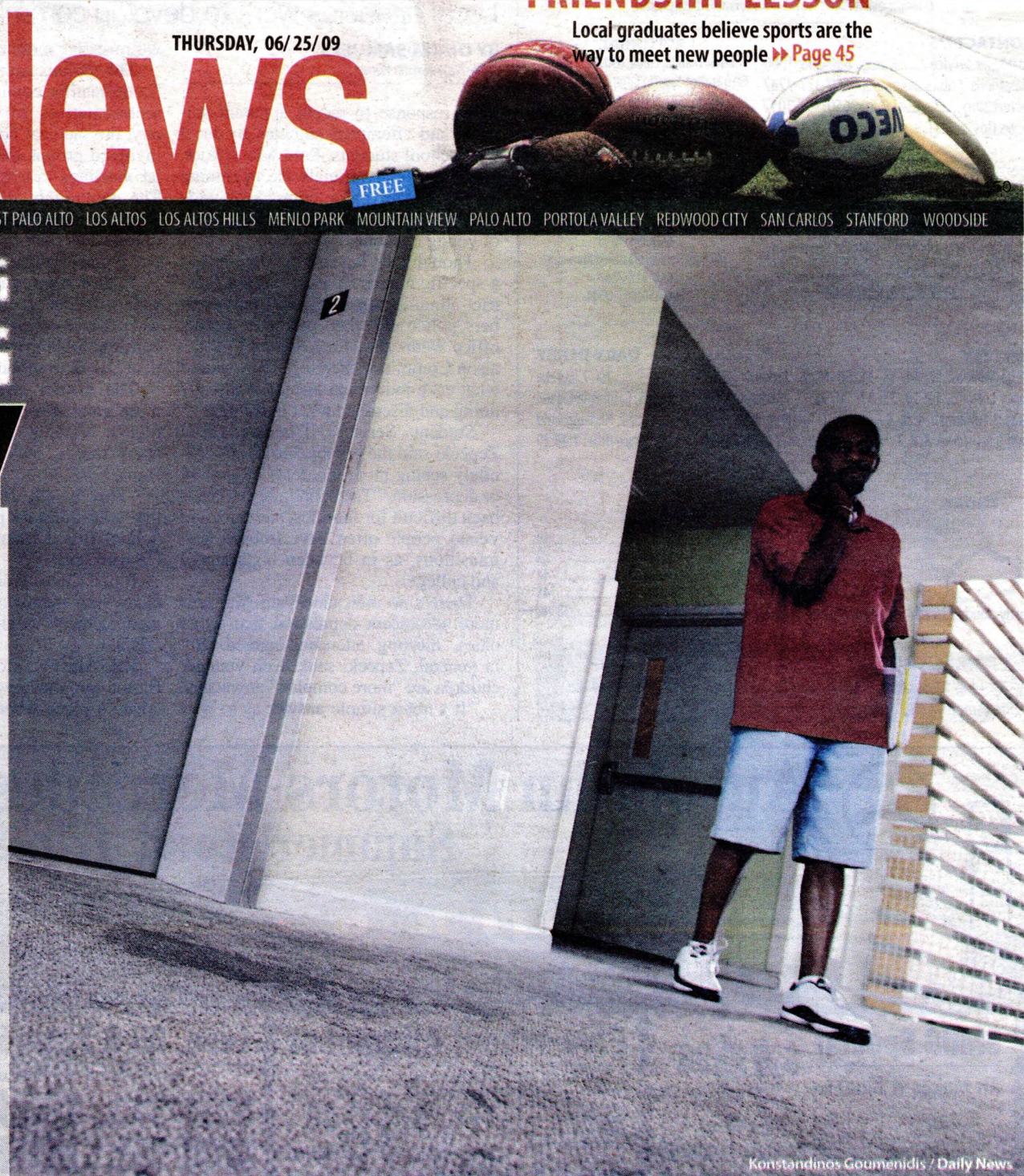
In April 2006, county and city officials gathered at 1730 Bay Road to celebrate the grand opening of the Courtyard at Bay Road, which was described in a statement distributed at the time as “a community of 77 affordable apartments set in an award-winning architectural design.”

San Mateo County contributed \$2 million to the project in construction loans, county Housing Director Duane Bay said. East Palo Alto has committed \$1.2 million to be paid over a number of years, and has made two \$60,000 payments thus far, city Housing Services Director Wilbert Lee said.

But things have gone downhill in the three years since the complex opened.

“The amount of vandalism that they’ve

HOUSING, page 13



Konstandinos Goumenidis / Daily News

Arnold Hart gives a tour of the Courtyard at Bay Road housing development in East Palo Alto earlier this month. Hart pointed out missing windows, worn carpeting and hallways that smelled of urine.

HOUSING

From page 1

encountered was never anticipated," Lee said. "The plate to the elevator was like somebody took a crowbar and took it off. They've had to come up with money to take care of the situation."

During two visits earlier this month, The Daily News observed ratty, stained carpets that reeked of urine, filthy common areas, a broken window in the laundry room and a gaping hole in the foam underneath a play structure for children.

A county health inspection conducted in March ordered the property manager to correct eight violations within 30 days, including cleaning all carpeting, replacing a missing window pane in the laundry room, inspecting the front entrance security phone system and deodorizing a stairwell.

Resident Arnold Hart, who has complained repeatedly to city and county officials about the development, credited Community Housing Developers for putting a night security guard at a desk inside the building's entrance earlier this year. Hart

said the guard's presence has deterred several homeless people from sleeping in the building each night and curbed car break-ins and thefts in the garage.

However, most of the maintenance and cleanliness issues persist, Hart said.

"It's a nice building, but it just went to parts because of poor management," he said.

Living in the complex has also proven difficult for Randy Shelton, who lost his job and home after becoming paralyzed from the waist down in a 2007 hit-and-run accident on Interstate 80.

Shelton has a code to unlock the front door but lacks the upper-body strength to pull it open. If the building manager is not in the office or Shelton's teenage sons are unavailable to help, the 48-year-old said he must wait outside for another tenant to open the door. That can sometimes take 15 minutes, he said.

"About eight times a day I have to go in and out," Shelton said last week. "Since I can't open the door, I have to wait until someone else comes."

Shelton said he finds it ironic that there is a handicapped decal on the front door.

Shelton's wife, Tanyua Shelton, said she constantly worries that her husband will be left outside in the rain.

"At least we could have a code that would automatically open the door," she said.

She added that the elevators often don't work, and she once had to call the fire department to carry her husband downstairs as a result.

Frank Rainone, the city's chief building official, said Monday that buildings constructed

after 2001 must have front doors with a maximum of five pounds of opening force to accommodate people with disabilities. Rainone said he would send an inspector to the complex to see whether it's in compliance.

But Wendy Cruz, vice president of Community Housing Developers, said city officials have checked the door and it's fine. No resident, including Shelton, has complained to the property manager about handicapped access, Cruz added.

Cruz said her organization corrected the violations mentioned in the county health report, but frequent vandalism is difficult to address. The laundry room window has been broken so many times that the nonprofit may install Plexiglas or drywall there, she said.

She added that some tenants were evicted after security cameras filmed them damaging the building.

"There's been a lot of improvement at this property," Cruz said, noting that many tenants had praised the progress at recent meetings. Cruz added that maintenance people pulled up much of the stairwell carpeting to deal with the urine smell and power-wash the floors and rugs once a month.

In 2007 the city of Santa Clara arranged for Community Housing Developers to transfer a 28-unit affordable housing complex called Peacock Court Apartments to a nonprofit that provides housing for recently emancipated foster children after receiving complaints about maintenance problems there, said Jeffrey Pedersen, Santa Clara's housing and community services division manager. The city had put \$800,000 into that project.

"There was very little investment being put into it as far as its maintenance," Pedersen said. "Fortunately, we were able to protect our investment, the city's investment, by another nonprofit coming in to play."

Cruz said her organization acquired an existing building for that complex years earlier and was preparing to rehabilitate it when the city proposed the transfer. She noted that residents caused plumbing problems there by flushing rice, grocery bags and other items down the toilets.

Housing Director Lee said he was working with Community Housing Developers as well as the city's housing committee to correct problems at the Courtyard at Bay Road. Tenants should complain to the property manager and let city officials know if their concerns aren't met, he said. Lee noted that the nonprofit has been cooperative so far, but the city is exploring all options.

"We have a legal agreement," Lee said. "There are things that we're responsible for. There are things that they're responsible for. If there is a breach of responsibility on either side, you have to talk to about it."

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