

East P.A. tenants settle with landlord

Building often cited for code violations

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In a decision cheered by tenants rights' advocates, 122 tenants from an East Palo Alto apartment complex long plagued by substandard conditions have reached a \$775,000 settlement with their landlord for failing to make their building a decent place to live.

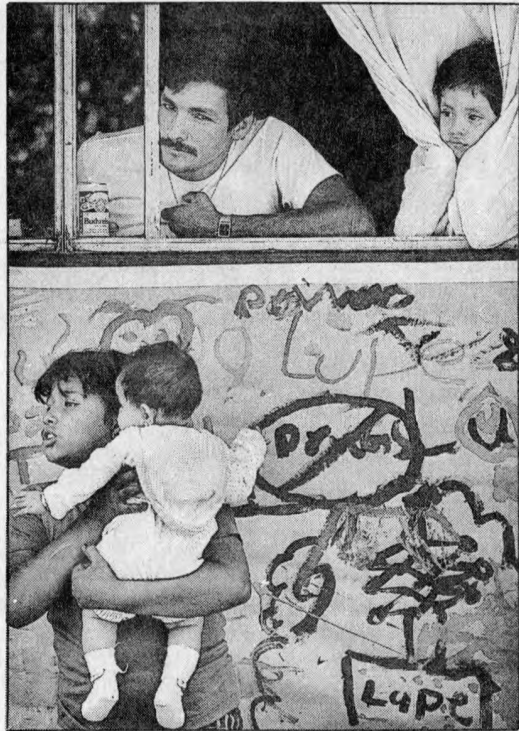
The settlement late Monday with landlord Hee Duk Kang, subtracting legal fees, gives roughly \$15,000 to each of the 32 families of 2000 Cooley Ave. who in April

1992 filed a San Mateo County Superior Court lawsuit against Kang for negligence.

"I'm very happy because I really need the money," said Victoria Gaytan, who moved out of the complex two years ago and lost her job in January. "If you pay for a place to live, they have to give you a good place. When they called me this afternoon (Tuesday), I couldn't believe it."

In settling the case before going to trial, Kang does not admit he was responsible for hundreds of health and safety code violations. But tenants rights' advocates say the deal, believed to be the biggest of its kind in San Mateo

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Tenants united to fight

In front of a paper mural painted by the complex's children, residents of 2000 Cooley watch an anti-drug party organized by Guardian Angels in 1989. Three years later, they sued the landlord.

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The \$775,000 settlement was a victory for the East Palo Alto Community Law Project, which helped tenants file the suit.

East P.A. landlord to pay out \$775,000

Settlement avoids trial in tenants' suit

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County, may make other landlords think twice about how they maintain their buildings.

"There's a tendency for landlords to come to poorer communities like East Palo Alto and try to take advantage of the situation," said William Webster, a member of East Palo Alto's rent stabilization board. "This is good news. It sends a message to our resident slumlords that they have got to start improving their bottom line by making their accommodations something fit for more than dogs and cats."

The suit was filed by the tenants and the East Palo Alto Community Law Project.

Kang, who has owned the building since 1988, could not be reached for comment Tuesday. But George Eshoo, Kang's attorney, said his client was pleased with the settlement, which he said was less than what the plaintiffs were seeking.

"It's easier to pay out these damages than it is to pay the defense costs," said Eshoo, adding that the case could have taken up to six months had it gone to trial.

The agreement, mediated by Superior Court Judge Gene Mc-

Donald, closes another chapter in the long-running saga of a building that health officials said was infested with vermin, lacked hot water and adequate heating, and had deteriorating floors, walls and ceilings and shoddy electrical wiring and plumbing.

In 1989, the tenants organized to demand changes because of what they said were the wretched condition of the apartments and the influx of drug dealers that jeopardized their lives and the health and safety of their children.

Subsequent investigations conducted by various government agencies produced an 85-page report documenting more than 1,000 serious violations in the building. After months passed without repairs being made, a Superior Court judge issued a temporary restraining order in April 1990 preventing Kang from selling the apartments or continuing to collect rent. Kang, without admitting any wrongdoing, agreed to complete repairs quickly and bring the complex up to code, as well as pay \$65,000 in penalties.

That apparently wasn't enough, though.

In July 1991, Kang was sentenced to live for 60 days in a Cooley apartment as punishment for attempting to bribe a housing inspector and avoid completing thousands of dollars in repairs to the apartments.