

Marin City residents sue housing authority over living conditions



Royce McLemore, president of the Golden Gate Village Resident Council, stands outside her home in Marin City, Calif. on Tuesday, Aug. 4, 2020. The council is suing the Marin Housing Authority for lack of maintenance, alleging that the housing authority is not tending to property so it will be redeveloped. (Sherry LaVars/Marin Independent Journal)

By Lorenzo Morotti

A group of public housing residents in Marin City filed a lawsuit against the county on Thursday, alleging they are living in squalid conditions because of official neglect.

The class-action lawsuit — filed on the 55-year anniversary of the Voting Rights Act — was filed on behalf of the Golden Gate Village resident council and 78 residents.

The defendants include the county itself, the Marin Housing Authority, the Marin Housing Authority Commission and two housing authority officials, executive director Lewis Jordan and manager Bernadette Stuart.

The lawsuit alleges that the county is violating the residents' rights by ignoring hazardous conditions such as exposed electrical wires, broken windows, dusty or broken ventilation systems, rat droppings and mold. It also claims landscape upkeep has been neglected and trash has accumulated around the property.

The plaintiffs allege that the defendants let the property fall into disarray so the housing authority can justify its redevelopment plan with New Jersey-based Michaels Development Co. The [plan](#) calls for preserving 300 residences, removing 16 others and building 156 new homes for a total of 440.

The lawsuit seeks an injunction against the redevelopment plan. The plaintiffs want the county to adopt the resident council's own renovation plan, which seeks to modernize apartments without tearing them down; create job opportunities for residents; and form a community land trust to promote home ownership within two years.

"We want the poor people of Marin County to experience home ownership and a whole change of life in a unit that has been upgraded," said Royce McLemore, president of the Golden Gate Village residents council. "So they don't have to worry about mold, cracks in doors and the windows and be able to wash clothes without the flooding. ... We've been forced to take action into our own hands and take it to the courts."

Stanley Goff, an attorney for the plaintiffs, said residents complained to environmental health officials about hazardous living conditions for about nine years, and the county did nothing to mitigate them.

"It appears it intentionally did that, and it appears they are in cahoots with the Marin Housing Authority to keep property in disarray," Goff said. "We allege that this was done so the housing authority would be entitled to have certain parts of the property demolished for market rate renters, which would displace a large amount of people, particularly African-Americans."

Marin County Counsel Brian Washington and Jordan said they have not seen the lawsuit and cannot comment on the allegations.

"I understand they are saying that Golden Gate Village has habitability issues," Washington said. "I know the housing authority disagrees with that. ... I can't comment without knowing what's being accused. I'll wait to comment until I know what allegations are being made."

The lawsuit says the residents are suffering racial discrimination in housing and community development opportunities and have been excluded from planning discussions. Marin's population is about 80% white and 2.8% Black, yet Marin City is 38.1% Black. Of that percentage, about 39% of Black residents live in public housing, according to the lawsuit.

Jordan disagrees, saying the housing authority has worked with the resident council to seek input and reassure residents that no one will be displaced because of the

renovation, but temporary relocation is needed. He added that the capital improvement budget of \$620,000, spread across six properties, is not enough to retrofit the complex.

“Due to the ongoing housing crisis, there are no places nearby to move a few dozen families at a time,” he said. “Therefore families would have to move out of Marin City. But we do not want to do this and the community has stated with good reason, that they don’t want to be moved out of their community where they shop, go to school, worship and where their friends and family are. So adding new units for relocation is part of an anti-displacement strategy.”

McLemore said she does not trust the county’s plan. She said the costs of rehabilitation reported by agencies hired by the housing authority jumped from \$16 million to \$90 million in just five years.

“Privatization is not in the interest of Golden Gate Village residents. It will take money out of the community and continue a dangerous cycle in America of erasing affordable public housing,” McLemore said. “With the Black Lives Matter movement, it’s clear that we all have the ability to stand on the right side of history — we’re asking the MHA and Marin Board of Supervisors to stand with us.”

Malachia Hoover, a Marin City resident, urged people to sign a [petition](#) asking people to support the creation of a community land trust and halting the county’s redevelopment plan. The petition has garnered more than 52,000 signatures.

“We deserve our living standards to be up to par,” said Hoover, an expecting mother.

“We live in one of the wealthiest counties in the world. There is no excuse why our units have been so neglected. Is it because we are predominantly African American?

“I want Marin City to be a place I can continue to plant my generational roots ... a place my daughter can be proud to say this is her home as well. Black lives, they do matter. They stole us, sold us and now they owe us.”