

Tuesday, March 4, 2008

Officials should fight for affordable housing

By Gisselle Acevedo and Paul Freese

AN hour before the doors opened, the line of families waiting in the early morning chill stretched around the corner.

They were waiting for free legal advice at a clinic sponsored by Para Los Niños and key partner organizations to help downtown tenants fighting evictions, unlivable conditions and rent increases.

LOCAL VIEW

Many were desperate. They were already one paycheck away from homelessness. Their landlords were threatening to evict them and downtown's housing boom was — ironically — helping drive them out of their homes.

The luxurious lofts in the city's core and their upscale residents are creating a more dynamic downtown. At the same time, though, they're driving up rents and driving out working-class families who relied on downtown's less expensive apartments.

Since 2000, about 95 percent of new apartments and condos in downtown have been luxury units. The higher rents these units command give downtown landlords new incentives to evict existing tenants and renovate their buildings.

Without the preservation and development of affordable rental housing throughout our city, the wheels of progress threaten to run right over our neediest residents.

If these families lose their homes, they must find a new place to live in one of the nation's most expensive — and tightest — rental markets. Rents average more than \$1,500 a month and vacancy rates in the area are at 4.5 percent. Plus, they have to come up with the first and last month's rent and a security deposit.

Fewer than one in five families can afford to buy a median-price home in Los Angeles. Renters make up 64 percent of the city's population, but have been overlooked in the current focus on homeowners losing their houses because of the mortgage crisis.

Los Angeles has a valuable stock

of more than 600,000 rent-stabilized apartments that are home to seniors, working families, people with disabilities as well as middle-class renters. Under the city's rent-stabilization ordinance, renters are protected from excessive rent increases and unreasonable evictions, while landlords are allowed a reasonable return on their investment.

Our region's leaders ought to be fighting to enforce rent-control laws and against measures such as Proposition 98, which is couched as an eminent-domain measure, but actually prohibits rent control in every jurisdiction and phases out existing rent control.

In addition, our area leaders should focus efforts on increasing the supply of affordable housing to meet the needs of our residents. They can start by offering financial incentives to renew affordable-housing agreements that are expiring.

They can also support reliable regulation of condo conversions and demolitions to keep workers housed near their jobs, and enforce rent-control laws to prevent renters from being forced out of their homes illegally.

To develop new affordable housing, the City Council should require developers to devote a certain percentage of their projects to affordable housing or pay a fee for its development. And they should take the city's affordable-housing trust fund out of the annual budget wrangling process by dedicating a permanent source for those funds.

Los Angeles' elected leaders should help those who waited in the cold for free advice and the tens of thousands of others who are one rent increase away from homelessness. By working together to end unreasonable evictions, preserve rental units and increase affordable housing, we can ensure that L.A. loses its unwanted distinction of being the nation's homeless capital.

Gisselle Acevedo is president/CEO of Para Los Niños, a nonprofit organization that assists low-income children and families throughout Southern California. Paul Freese is acting president/CEO of Public Counsel, the world's largest pro-bono public-interest law firm.