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Federal judge sides with evicted hotel tenants in dispute with L.A. agency

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A federal judge has found that the city of Los Angeles allowed more than 100 poor and disabled people to be improperly evicted from a downtown residential hotel slated for redevelopment.

Judge Margaret M. Morrow issued a preliminary injunction last week ordering the city's Community Redevelopment Agency to locate dozens of the now potentially homeless people and pay them relocation funds.

She also ordered the owner of the Alexandria to make the building habitable for the remaining 100-plus tenants, many of whom are elderly and disabled.

The ruling is the latest turn in a long-running battle over redevelopment downtown. It marks a victory for the homeless and their advocates, whose claims that hotel owners were treating them badly fell on deaf ears in city government for months.

"This decision tells both the city of Los Angeles and developers that they cannot simply push out poor people in order to gentrify redevelopment areas when public funds are supposed to be used to improve conditions for those very residents," said Becky Dennison, co-director of the Los Angeles Community Action Network.

A spokesman for the city attorney's office said attorneys are still studying the rules and would have no further comment.

A call to the developer was not returned.

The Alexandria, a stately building at 5th and Spring streets, was built 102 years ago as a luxury hotel. Its architect, John Parkinson, also designed such notable buildings as Los Angeles City Hall, Union Station and the Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum.

For a time, the hotel, with its Tiffany skylight, was the most glamorous in all Los Angeles. But by the 1980s, as downtown fell on hard times, the beaux-arts revival landmark had become a weekly rate residential hotel, serving as housing of last resort for hundreds of disabled people.

In 2006, as gentrification was sweeping through downtown and lofts began to transform old buildings, developer Ruben Islas and partners purchased the building and began renovating it.

Islas, who specializes in low-income and senior housing, pledged to keep the building as affordable housing and received funds from the CRA and the federal government to help pay for the rehab.

Soon, however, many long-time tenants of the building, organized by homeless advocacy groups such as the Community Action Network, began accusing developers of waging an illegal campaign to get them out and replace them with wealthier clientele.

They claimed that the water and elevators were shut off for days at a time, destroying their quality of life and leaving the disabled among them stranded upstairs without potable water or flushing toilets.

The Los Angeles City Council and the CRA board declined to step in, despite the parade of residents in wheelchairs urging them to do something.

Islas denied the charges and accused his critics of sabotaging work at the Alexandria by turning off the water and disrupting service on an elevator.

Last fall, residents filed a lawsuit charging that Islas and his partners "systematically and intentionally worked to remove the long-term tenants of the Alexandria and replace them with non-elderly, non-disabled and non-African American tenants."

The lawsuit, which seeks damages, is set for trial next year.

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