

The Edgar Street massacre

By Eric Scigliano September 23, 1998 at 12:00AM

If Harbor House was last spring's poster child for housing-crunch horrors, this season's demonstration case is a small apartment building at 100 E. Edgar Street in Eastlake. KOMO and KING TV had a go at it, and the Post-Intelligencer did a long take-out on Monday. It's a grim case, but a timely one—arriving just as the Seattle City Council considers ordinances to (slightly) mitigate the ravages on renters of roughshod-landlording and a runaway housing market.

On August 31 Greg Pinneo of Edmonds wrote to the 11 Edgar Street tenants that he'd bought the building, their bargain rents would rise drastically, and they'd also have to pony up new damage deposits and month's rents in advance. As the law allows, they had 10 days to say if they'd pay or move out. William Smith, a disabled retiree on a ventilator, had paid \$465 for a one-bedroom, 499-square-foot flat and parking space. His new rent: \$970, plus \$75 a month for a storage locker that had been gratis. He must also come up with \$1,195 for deposit and last month's rent that weren't required in all his 30 years on Edgar Street. But hey, Michele Pasquale's rent for what she calls "a tiny studio" with parking only went up 83 percent, to \$915.

"It's not a livable city if you can't afford to live in it," says Smith, adding that he'll go look up relatives in Oregon: "I can't sleep on a park bench. I need electricity for my ventilator." He adds that "three or four" tenants are stuck, for now, at Edgar Street; the rest are moving out—including one who just had radical surgery.

And that just might be the point, suggests Lisa Herbold, an aide to council member Nick Licata and a former Seattle Tenants' Union staffer. With its Lake Union views, the run-down Edgar Street property seems ripe for upscaling. The city's Tenant Relocation Ordinance says an owner who wants to empty and renovate must give current residents 90 days' notice and \$500 assistance. (The city kicks in another \$500.) But if they move out "voluntarily," the landlord neither waits nor pays.

Herbold says that Pinneo "told one tenant that as soon as she moves out, he's going to put in hardwood floors—proof he plans renovation." she adds that the biggest single rent increase she'd ever seen before this one came when rents doubled, fees were added, and everyone moved out of a small Queen Anne area building—after Pinneo bought it.

Pinneo himself declines to comment, except to say, "This is taking way too much of my time and emotion—I've got to make a living. I don't care what other people say. I know who I am." Administrative-law records show that last year the state revoked Pinneo's real estate broker's license for getting multiple financing on properties without disclosing these to the lenders.

Just don't encourage them

What good does exposing landlord practices like this do? It may just give ideas to other greedy beavers—as when Mayor Paul Schell implored landlords to keep annual rent increases below 10 percent, and one promptly raised rents 10 percent because "the mayor said to." But it also lends wings to council efforts (where's the mayor when it comes to action?) to give tenants a few more protections. Last Thursday, the council's housing committee unanimously approved an ordinance that would make landlords give 60 days' notice of rent increases of more than 10 percent (instead of the 30 days' notice state law requires for all rent increases). By the time you read this, the whole council may have passed it. It's a small-bore reform, a mere pacing of execution. But as Licata, who sponsored it with Peter Steinbrueck, has noted, it "would be the first tenants' rights law passed in Seattle since 1993."

Perhaps a similar stay on new deposits and advance rent payments would also help. (Banning these outright might be more fair, but might also run afoul of a state law forbidding local rent control laws.) Herbold thinks not, because "you don't see what's happening at Edgar Street happening very often." Better, she says, to amend the Relocation Ordinance to assure that "excessive rents and deposits" aren't used to force tenants out without paying the relocation fee. One way might be to "say that if [renovation] permits are pulled at a unit within a certain time, the ordinance would trigger anyway," and ex-tenants would still collect. Or require that the landlord make a "good-faith effort" to re-rent the unit before upgrading. More small-bore measures.

At the state level, Herbold talks of pitching the Legislature for a "narrow exemption" from the rent-control ban, to ensure that ban is not used to circumvent the city's housing code and tenant-protection laws. Good luck; when the apartment owners talk, the Legislature walks, and each year Seattle relies on the governor to veto state bills that would overturn those laws.