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## Burlington renters fear they'll lose homes

*By John Briggs, Free Press Staff Writer*

The 44 renters at Wharf Lane Apartments, at 57 Maple St. in Burlington, are worried they could be out of a home by this time next year.

"It's a combination of fear, a lot of tension and anxiety from wondering what could happen," said Joe Lane, 38, who has lived in the apartments since 2002. "The unknown of what could happen is a scary feeling."

<http://www.burlingtonfreepress.com/apps/pbcs.dll/gallery?Avis=BT&Dato=20100624&Kategori=NEWS&openr=6240801&Ref=PH>"> **Photos:** Wharf Lane Apartments residents meet

The building, owned by Pizzagalli Properties of South Burlington, has been on a 30-year federal Housing and Urban Development mortgage, which expires next year. Pizzagalli told the residents in late March they wouldn't renew their HUD arrangement and will put the property up for sale.

Pizzagalli didn't respond Wednesday to a request for comment.

Vera Newman, a resident of the apartments who has been helping to organize the tenants, said the average renter in the four-story brick building has an annual income of \$12,000.

"And many have lived there for over 15 years," she said at a gathering Wednesday night among residents, city officials and others. "Most are elderly or disabled."

She added that the renters could face homelessness if the property were sold and the rents reached commercial levels, as waiting lists for affordable housing in Burlington range from two to four years. "There may simply be nowhere for residents to go," she said.

Residents' problems have been compounded by a fire March 11 in a third-floor apartment. Water from sprinklers damaged a number of apartments, and repairs are just now beginning. The elevator, a necessity for some of the disabled on the upper stories, was out of commission until late May.

Residents have had trouble, a number said, getting information about when repairs will be done from the Burlington Housing Authority, which manages the building for Pizzagalli Properties.

"They couldn't or wouldn't tell us anything," Gabrielle Ducharme said. "Whenever I ask when something is going to be fixed, they don't know."

"The only thing they came out to tell us is that Pizzagalli was selling the building," Newman said.

The uncertainty about her future housing unsettled 25-year resident Peg Batchelder, 83, who said the building has been a "safe and secure" place to live over the years.

Batchelder's anxiety inspired resident Cindy Hendee, 38, to begin a petition drive urging local nonprofits and the city to work to save the low-income apartments. If the apartments were transformed into market-rate housing, the petition said, residents would "be at risk of becoming homeless because there are not enough affordable apartments in Burlington."

Hendee, who is still displaced from her apartment as a result of the fire, has collected 800 signatures.

Pizzagalli Properties has a similar mortgage on the nearby Bobbin Mill apartments. It expires next year, said Brian Pine, CEDO's housing director. He said 400 low-income apartments across town face similar circumstances during the next three years.

Wednesday, Pine (representing the city) and representatives of HUD, the Champlain Valley Office of Economic Opportunity, the Vermont Center for Independent Living and the Northgate Residents' Ownership Corp. met with residents at the apartments in a combination barbecue and advice session.

"This is a top priority for our office," Pine said.

"HUD is very aware of what's going on here," said Mike McNamara, who heads the federal office in Burlington.

The building will be appraised for current market value, and the Burlington Housing Authority has been designated as the preferred buyer of the property by the Vermont Housing Finance Agency, which under the HUD contract has an opportunity to find a buyer.

Pine told the assembled residents they were secure in their apartments at least until March. "You've got everyone on your side in city government," he said.

Asked if he was comforted by statements, Joe Lane smiled. "Somewhat," he said.

Contact John Briggs at 660-1863 or [jbriggs@burlingtonfreepress.com](mailto:jbriggs@burlingtonfreepress.com).