

Summerset Crisis ignites face-off over code enforcement

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A mobile kitchen delivered its first meals to residents of Summerset Village Apartments in central Fresno on Thanksgiving morning.

“Roasted landlord” was not the breakfast entrée.

But it might as well have been.

Fresno’s residential landlords, especially those connected in any way to apartment complexes, are doomed as the Season of Peace approaches. Stick a fork in ‘em – they’re done for.

That was the unmistakable message after Mayor Ashley Swearengin’s half hour news conference Wednesday afternoon at a non-profit’s headquarters right across the street from Summerset.

“We have urged him to make a public apology,” Swearengin said of Summerset owner Chris Henry.

When City Hall “urges,” watch out.

Make no mistake, Swearengin’s anger is fully justified. Broken natural gas pipelines in Summerset mean the tenants are without gas, heat and hot water.

How many tenants? As many as 1,000, a community activist told me.

How long will they suffer? Swearengin made no guesses on Wednesday, saying only that the city will assume control of repairs as soon as next week if Henry does move fast and in force (i.e. money).

Here are a dozen thoughts on events:

- 1.) Tens of thousands of dollars have been donated to help Summerset’s residents. Dozens of volunteers are at work. “So many people have come together to respond to this crisis,” Swearengin said.
- 2.) The Summerset apartments are on the 2100 block of North Angus Street. They cover an area the size of several inner-city blocks. Their neighborhood (half-mile radius) includes the Fresno Art Museum, Radio Park and the Veterans Hospital. The beautiful Parc Grove Commons apartments (Fresno Housing Authority project) are just to the north of Summerset. The visual contrast between the two couldn’t be more stark.
- 3.) Swearengin called the news conference to update reporters on the progress of repairs and tenant assistance. She also signed a “state of emergency” declaration. This gives the city authority to act fast if Henry drags his heels. The City Council at a special meeting on Monday will debate whether to approve the declaration.
- 4.) Swearengin spoke at the headquarters of Fresno Interdenominational Refugee Ministries (FIRM). The same building, just a few yards south of Summerset, also serves as the Summerset Community Center. FIRM, according to its website, serves primarily refugees of Southeast Asian, Slavic and African origin.
- 5.) The most pressing challenge is restoring natural gas service to all Summerset apartments. But, as Swearengin noted, the longer term hurdle involves an issue that has roiled the waters at City Hall for years – code enforcement. The city has broad powers to ensure that Fresnoans have access to a minimum standard of housing. Swearengin on Wednesday said code enforcement officers were giving Summerset a thorough review. A simple walk around the

apartments was enough (at least for me) to suspect Summerset's roofs and outside walls would immediately catch the eyes of city staff. No telling what the insides of these aging apartments look like.

6.) Many of Fresno's activist-oriented nonprofits are frustrated with what they see as City Hall's tepid use of code enforcement authority. These nonprofits, loosely aligned on many social justice issues, think "slumlords" have it too easy at City Hall. Their frustration came to a head earlier this year during meetings of the city's Code Enforcement Task Force, a public-private group charged with crafting new building codes. The council did pass a blighted vacant building ordinance, but it dealt with the outside of run-down residential buildings. The activists wanted City Hall to pass tough rules the insidex of houses/apartments.