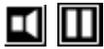


# Bill McEwen: Chris Henry is Fresno's dartboard of the moment

BY BILL MCEWEN

Until last week, it must have been pretty cool to be Chris A. Henry, a family trust recipient and the owner of hip restaurants in wealthy coastal cities, oil wells in Kern County and the Summerset Village Apartments in Fresno.

On the website for his [Barrel House Tavern](#) in Sausalito, there was a picture of Henry appearing confident and poised. The picture was placed above a copy block describing his love for preserving old things and his passion for sustainability.



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Summerset Village Apartment tenants in Fresno talk about the loss of heat and how thankful they are for help from agencies like the American Red Cross and the Southern Baptist Convention Disaster Relief organization. [Read the story: Fresno leaders committed to fix 'Third World conditions' at apartment complex if 'slumlord' doesn't step up](#) Eric Paul Zamora [ezamora@fresnobee.com](mailto:ezamora@fresnobee.com)

That part of the tavern's website was taken down Monday night.

Why?

It might have something to do with the fact that Henry has been exposed as a slumlord. [Summerset Village](#), normally home to about 1,500 residents, many of them Southeast Asian and Hispanic immigrants, has been without heat since Nov. 12.

Indeed, the complex is a shameful example of substandard housing. Renters there report mold and roaches. There are holes in the roofs of some units. Boards cover broken windows. Driveways within the complex are crumbling. And the lines that delivered natural gas to the apartments are in such disrepair that a [Pacific Gas & Electric Co. crew disconnected the gas](#).

Thus, Henry has been exposed as a hypocrite. Anyone who reads a newspaper or receives a link to an online story knows it. Even his friends and employees in Sausalito and Santa Barbara. He no longer can hide behind corporate names on the secretary of state's website.

Summerset Village wasn't being preserved; it was being plundered for profit. The only thing there that screams "sustainability" is the enduring spirit of residents and the volunteers who have stepped up to help families in a crisis.

Spending the next 60 nights at Summerset Village might change Chris Henry's world view for the better.

Henry is still rich, but his wealth now is burdened by notoriety. He is Fresno's living, breathing dartboard of the moment – the object of venom from renters, community organizers, politicians and the community at large.

So be it. Henry is deserving of the animus directed his way. One moment, he told The Bee's Rory Appleton that he inspects the complex once a month. Then he said the last time he was there was three months ago. Longtime tenants said that they never had seen Henry on the premises. And City Hall has found hundreds of code violations.

City Council Member and 2016 mayoral candidate Lee Brand, a commercial real estate owner, told me that Henry is "exploiting people who are afraid to speak up and are living in Third World conditions."

Enough about Henry, who now will do what savvy businessmen do: calculate the expected \$1 million price of making Summerset Village livable vs. the costs of a legal battle with the city and giving the complex back to the bank.

Going forward, the focus must shift from Henry to City Hall and other Fresno slumlords such as JD Home Rentals.

This much is certain: His announced gift of \$25,000 to Fresno Interdenominational Refugee Ministries won't buy him friends in Fresno. It's too little, too late. And so was his apology.

Going forward, the focus must shift from Henry to City Hall, other Fresno slumlords such as JD Home Rentals and community groups advocating for better living conditions for the poor.

Fresno long has been plagued by slumlike housing, but Fresno officials – typically free-market opponents of government regulation – have been slow to intervene. Last year, Mayor Ashley Swearingin and the City Council took a small bite of this rotten apple with a plan targeting blight created by an estimated 1,000 vacant homes, almost all of them on Fresno's south side.

This represented progress. Fixing a problem this long in the making and this complex isn't like flipping a switch. But the plan, as the Summerset Village emergency has illustrated, is clearly insufficient.

The mayor and City Council must hire more code enforcement officers as soon as possible and train them properly. Then they must hire even more code enforcement officers in the next budget cycle. Most of all, City Hall must come up with a plan that includes interior inspections of apartments in complexes with a history of problems such as nonworking smoke detectors, mold and faulty wiring.

City Hall knows who the slumlords are. It's past time for the people's representatives to make them toe the line or put them out of business.

Community groups also have an important role to play beyond advocating for tighter regulations and stricter enforcement of the housing code.

They should be educating renters about their responsibilities and their rights. Renters must learn to speak up when things are wrong. Otherwise, slumlords will continue to exploit them. Staying silent and suffering the consequences – rather than risking the loss of an apartment or house – greases the status quo.

The mess that emerged out of the shadows of Summerset Village will change the calculus of the 2016 race to choose Swearingin's successor. We will hear a lot about slumlords. Just as we will hear a lot about building more parks on Fresno's south side, in addition to the usual candidate prescriptions for lowering crime and improving the economy.

(Chris Henry) is exploiting people who are afraid to speak up and are living in Third World conditions.

Fresno City Council Member Lee Brand

On Facebook, several people have said that Henry should be sentenced by a judge to live in one of his squalid

rentals. To date, he hasn't been charged with anything, much less convicted of anything, in connection with Summerset Village – except in the court of public opinion.

But there are judges in America who have peered down from the bench and forced slumlords to confront the reality of living in their properties.

I quote the Jan. 16, 1998, edition of The New York Times:

“Although she is a suburban jurist, Judge JoAnn Friia grew up in a working-class quarter of Corona, Queens, and she knows firsthand the gnawing chill of a heatless apartment in winter and the shame of a run-down habitat.

“So on Wednesday, when she was confronted in White Plains City Court with a landlord who had left 20 tenants in two adjoining buildings without heat and hot water and with only partial electricity on two January nights and failed to fix falling plaster and an entrance door lock, she decided upon a novel sentence.

“She ordered the landlord, Florence Nyemitei, 71, to spend most of the next 60 nights – starting tonight – sleeping in an apartment in one of the two buildings. She also imposed a \$10,000 fine.

“ ‘I got the idea that she ought to get a taste of her own medicine,’ Judge Friia said. ‘She wouldn’t want to freeze. She wouldn’t want to sit in the dark.’ ”

I bet spending the next 60 nights at Summerset Village – relying on blankets for heat at night and a mobile shower unit for cleanliness – might change Chris Henry’s world view for the better.