



CITY OF SAINT PAUL
OFFICE OF THE CITY COUNCIL
310 CITY HALL
15 WEST KELLOGG BOULEVARD
SAINT PAUL, MN 55102-1615
Marcia Moermond, Legislative Hearing Officer
EMAIL: legislativehearings@ci.stpaul.mn.us
PHONE: (651) 266-8585 FAX: (651) 266-8574

December 4, 2017

Ann Mulholland, Vice President of Community Impact
Saint Paul Foundation
101 Fifth Street East, Ste. 2400
Saint Paul, MN 55101-1800

VIA EMAIL: ann.mulholland@spmcf.org

Re: Request for Aid for Displaced Families of 1032 Duluth Street

Dear Ms. Mulholland:

I am making a request for emergency aid on behalf of the City of Saint Paul. We are asking the Saint Paul Foundation provide assistance to the families of approximately 12-15 units of 1032 Duluth Street for what we believe will be one or two nights at a local hotel.

As you are aware, there was a significant fire at 1032 Duluth Street on November 13, 2017 which resulted in the all 32 units of this affordable apartment building being vacated. The fire happened in what our professionals describe as the worst possible location: it was an electrical fire in the utility room which took out all the electrical, the boilers and water heaters. Fortunately, there is no water or smoke damage which would have slowed the reoccupation of the building once these basic facilities are restored. The owners, Dhaneshwarie & Pawan Himraj (9329 Balsam Fir Ave., Brooklyn Park MN 55443), immediately contacted an fire recovery electrician who restored light to the hallways, the water heaters were put back on line and 2 of the 4 boilers were restarted – which is enough heat to keep the pipes from freezing, but isn't livable in our rapidly cooling weather.

From the beginning, the City worked with the Red Cross, which was able to house people for 72 hours following this emergency. The city then allowed the building to be re-occupied under careful watch and the promise the landlords would immediately be restoring the electrical. It should be noted that the city was very reluctant to put the 100+ residents into the streets if a solution was on the immediate horizon. However, our hopes for a rapid repair were dashed – the electric was not immediately restored. The owners got their first bid, found it high, and they proceeded to price shop at what the city believes was a very slow pace. Meanwhile, living conditions rapidly declined from bad to worse in the apartment building. With no electrical in the units, the tenants couldn't use their refrigerators or stoves and had only battery-operated lights. Not surprisingly, extension cords appeared everywhere supplying the units with electricity from the hall, overloading the system and creating an additional hazard. One woman was reliant on this electrical situation for her oxygen.

The city reluctantly re-issued the order to vacate the building on Tuesday, November 28, giving residents notice to be out by 1 p.m. Wednesday November 29, 2017. The owners appealed this order and I conducted an emergency hearing on behalf of the City Council on Wednesday morning.

At the Legislative Hearing, we heard more about the actions of two local nonprofits also came to the aide of the residents. Both the Community Stabilization Project (CSP) and Southern Minnesota Regional Legal Services (SMRLS) took action. The day following the fire, (SMRLS) files an Emergency Tenant Remedy Action (ETRA) which ordered the owners to immediately restoration of electrical services. The court declined to order the landlords to house the tenants, I believe because the Red Cross was still engaged at that juncture. After a week of no restoration of services, SMRLS filed an order to show cause with the courts. They can ask for fines, penalties, jail time and for the landlord to house the tenants. The court date is Thursday December 7, 2017.

The emergency legislative hearing also gathered information from emergency management and inspections staff. At that juncture, the city's senior electrical inspector said it would likely be 6 days for the electric to be restored once the work was initiated – 3 to get the parts and 3 to do the work.

It was clear to me that I could not recommend that the city council allow the building to continue to be occupied with no clear plan for restoration of electrical services, cooling weather and rapidly deteriorating building conditions. When this was voiced, Travis Bistodeau of the City's Department of Safety and Inspections renewed his communication with Ramsey County to get emergency housing assistance. The county was able to come through with 6 nights of housing for up to 15 of the families.

Finally, I think it's important to say that all of the tenants, most especially those who have needed to re-occupy their units under these conditions are experiencing additional expenses their family budgets are not equipped to handle. Those 15 families who returned to the building are the most needy, having the least savings and fewest alternatives to stay with friends or family. I think it's important to add that even with the Red Cross' help, it is expensive to live in these conditions. Families who normally prepare their own food need to rely on fast food and peanut butter sandwiches. They have needed to figure out different family transportation from their temporary quarters to school and jobs.

Tonight the Ramsey County emergency housing assistance came to an end. According to our senior electrical inspector, the building will likely be habitable tomorrow or Wednesday and work is underway at a brisk pace. Therefore, it is the City's request that if other funding cannot be secured from the owners or others, that the Saint Paul Foundation step in to help bridge this gap. We are grateful for your consideration of this request.

Sincerely,

Marcia Moermond
Legislative Hearing Officer & Senior Policy Analyst

cc: City Councilmember Amy Brendmoen
Deputy Mayor Kristen Beckman
Director Ricardo Cervantes, Department of Safety and Inspections
Deputy Director Travis Bistodeau, Department of Safety and Inspections