Tenants rally, protest apartment conditions

Residents cite trash, rodents at Conifer Realty buildings

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Residents of buildings operated by one of Rochester's largest landlords, Conifer Realty, rallied outside the company's University Avenue office on Thursday, demanding action after city inspectors documented hundreds of code violations, many of which remain open months later.

One of those residents, Yolanda Gavin, lives at Park Square, formerly Manhattan Square, in downtown. She lived there in the 1970s as a child and returned to the building five years ago.

"When I moved in, it was like a haven. I would come home from work and all the areas were nice and we had security," Gavin said.

The past 18 months have been a different story. Residents claim that reductions in staff mean they've been cleaning common areas with their own supplies, have dealt with unrepaired maintenance issues and have lacked building security.

Frustrated residents took to the parking lot of Conifer's office July 30, chanting and holding signs as they seek improvements. The rally was the culmination of action that started with conversations in the courtyard of the building.

"The next thing you know, we met in the community room and the next thing we were learning landlord-tenant law … We became activists on accident,"Gavin said.

The building's certificate of occupancy expired Dec. 1, 2025, city records show.



Yolanda Gavin, a member of the City-Wide Tenant Union of Rochester and tenant at Park Square, joins protesters outside Conifer Realty on University Avenue July 30 in Rochester. Conifer owns Park Square, affordable housing located at 10 Manhattan Square Drive, where most of the protesters live. PHOTOS BY TINA MACINTYRE-YEE/ROCHESTER DEMOCRAT AND CHRONICLE



Dumpsters are being filled with trash on July 30 at Park Square, affordable housing at 10 Manhattan Square Drive owned by Conifer Realty. One tenant said that in the past trash had been backed up in the chutes, causing odors and vermin inside the building.

Upon reinspection, code enforcement officers found at least 599 violations. They range from hazardous infractions with seemingly simple fixes — lint accumulating behind dryers in the laundry room, exposed wiring, missing smoke alarms and emergency lights — to routine apartment maintenance that has gone neglected.

One citation notes fecal matter in a stairwell. The oldest violations remain open from a Feb. 26 walkthrough.

The city gave Conifer up to 30 days to fix the issues, but it is unclear what sanctions, if any, the real estate developer has faced after those deadlines lapsed. City officials have the authority to issue fines for problems that aren't addressed within a reasonable timeframe.

Dave Lanzillo, vice president of marketing and communications at Conifer, said in an email that Park Square and its other Rochester properties are not being ignored or left unaddressed. Instead, he said the list of code violations are part of the city's three-year multifamily inspection process, which the company is working through now.

"There are nine remaining issues and we are working with the residents of those units to secure approval to enter their apartments in order to complete repairs. We are in the same inspectionand-repair phase at other local Conifer communities," Lanzillo said.

Residents of the Park Square Apartments say they've spent the last year dealing with overflowing garbage dumpsters, infestations of rodents, broken elevators and messy common spaces — issues they attribute to understaffing of the 336-unit complex.

Recently, some tenants said they received new bills for back rent and fees they weren't informed about. Park Square is a subsidized building for lowincome tenants.

Annette Vereen, who lives at Park Square, said residents have had to take over cleaning those common spaces. Tenants are taking on tasks like mopping elevators and vacuuming hallways.

"The carpets are filthy throughout the building. Trash is built up in the chutes. We have a lady that cleans our community room just about every other day and she's a tenant," Vereen said.

Ryan Acuff, an organizer with the Rochester Tenant Union, said Conifer is a city and state favorite for governmentfunded affordable housing projects, despite known issues at its existing properties.

Park Square tenants have drafted a collective bargaining agreement that would force Conifer to address the open code violations within 60 days and agree to hire additional maintenance and security personnel. If Conifer refuses to sign the contract, they plan to present City Council with legislation that would block the city from awarding public funds, tax incentives or municipal land to property owners or developers with documented code violations.

"They continue to get shoveled money for new projects, when the city's own public records show that they're not keeping up with their own promises," Acuff said. "These are not just accusations from tenants."

"One of the questions that I always ask people that have been there a long time is, how does this compare to the past? Is this the worst it's ever been? And people say yes," Acuff said.

The gathered residents have suggested additional activity if conditions don't improve. They said their contention isn't with the staff at the building, but those running the company.

"Conifer's mission is to provide, safe affordable housing. That's their mission ... And where's the safety at? Where's the affordability at?" Vereen said.

"The carpets are filthy throughout the building. Trash is built up in the chutes. We have a lady that cleans our community room just about every other day and she's a tenant."

Annette Vereen

Park Square tenant

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