

# Daily Journal

## A Tale of Two Lobbies

A Boom in Lofts Threatens Housing for Skid Row Poor

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LOS ANGELES - Downtown Los Angeles' Frontier Hotel has two entrances: one for residents of the first seven floors, another for those who live at the top.

Rose bushes in large pots frame the main entrance, decorated with banners advertising lofts. The doorway leads to a newly furnished lobby, recently restored to its original grandeur.

The other entrance, tucked away on the side of the building, is blocked by a security gate and opens to a bleak concrete chamber.

Elevators in this second lobby don't always work, and the stairwell is pockmarked with holes exposing the entrails of the 93-year-old building, residents say.

"It's a two-class system," said Al Sabo, 61, a Frontier resident. "It's like going back to the days of discrimination, when the black folks had to enter through the back."

The Frontier is one of Los Angeles' many single-room-occupancy, or SRO, hotels, last-resort housing for the city's poorest.

An estimated 23,000 people live in these SROs in the city, roughly 13,000 of them downtown.

Many have no legal protections because they never gained renter status, which only goes into effect after 30 days under the city's Rent Stabilization Ordinance.

Residents who occupy a room for 30 days cannot be evicted except as allowed under the ordinance. And if they are evicted, they must be paid relocation fees.

In a common practice housing advocates call the 28-day shuffle, SRO residents, some of whom have lived in these hotels for more than a decade, say they are forced to move or leave every 28 days, before legal protections kick in.

The Frontier once was one of the biggest of downtown's single-room-occupancy hotels when it had 450 rooms.

But owner Rob Frontiera is converting the rooms into expensive lofts, now in high demand downtown.

Floor by floor, residents say, they are being moved out to make room for those who want to rent lofts.

Frontiera said rents on converted floors range between \$900 and \$2,000 a month.

Housing advocates, once concerned with fighting the city and downtown landlords to improve slum conditions for residents of these hotels, are now fighting merely to preserve those rooms.

Owners of what were once some of the city's most blighted properties now find that those properties have become some of the most desired. Buildings in block after downtown block are festooned with banners advertising lofts.

"It's market forces at work, but it's politicians jumping on that bandwagon," said Pete White, co-director of the Los Angeles Community Action Network, a community organization.

The network began hearing complaints about the 28-day shuffle in 2002.

"We realized there was already a state law in place that prohibited the shuffle, but there wasn't any enforcement," said co-director Becky Dennison.

The community group began documenting the illegal practice in several downtown SROs and gave the evidence to City Attorney Rocky Delgadillo.

Delgadillo sent a letter to downtown residency hotel owners in January 2004, warning them to stop "shuffling"

their residents.

"If your establishment engages in the practice," the letter said, "I urge you to desist at once. Failure to comply can result in serious legal consequences."

Frontiera said he received such a letter.

"We got fewer complaints after that," Dennison said.

But legal action never followed, she said, and things went back to business as usual.

Dennison said the city attorney's office has been working on a lawsuit against SRO hotel owners that was supposed to be filed in November.

City attorney's office spokesman Jonathan Diamond said Friday a suit will be filed this week, but he declined to discuss details.

Advocates and legal observers ask why it has taken so long.

"It's not a terribly complicated case to plead or litigate," said UCLA law professor Gary Blasi. "Either you're shuffling or you're not."

Blasi said laws to protect poor or homeless people often go unenforced, while the laws that end up hurting them are enforced ruthlessly.

Meanwhile, the Frontier's top five floors have been emptied.

"On the one hand, there's all this controversy about what to do with people on the street, but this practice is putting people on the street," Blasi said.

"It's always easier to keep people off the street than to deal with them once they're there," he said.

The city planning commission unanimously approved a temporary moratorium on SRO conversions March 9. If the City Council approves the measure, it will remain in effect for a year, with two possible six-month extensions while the city drafts an ordinance.

Observers said the council is looking at a San Francisco ordinance allowing landlords to convert property but requiring them to replace that property with low-income housing.

Dennison said city officials "finally realized that if you empty all these buildings, the renovation of downtown would not be successful with 5,000 more homeless people on the street."

Most long-term Frontier residents say they are no longer being shuffled. They say Frontiera is trying to relocate those on the floors he wants to convert by moving them to other floors or to the adjacent Roslyn hotel, which he also owns.

"Some of these owners no longer bother to do the 28-day shuffle," said Legal Aid Foundation of Los Angeles' Tai Glenn.

"What I see now is straight rent-control violations and harassment," she said, adding that residents are either evicted or harassed into leaving.

John Maldonado said he is the last resident left on the Frontier's 7th floor. Everyone else on his floor "just got kicked out," he said. "They were just intimidated."

"I'm here because this is what I can afford right now," he said. "I regularly work two full-time jobs just to make ends meet."

Maldonado said he works at a hauling company and also repairs computers.

He has lived at the Frontier for three years and watched the empty buildings in downtown's historic core, home to downtown's biggest SROs, being converted into lofts.

He said he knew it was only a matter of time before developers set their sights on residency hotels.

In the last three years, the city has lost nearly 600 rooms in downtown residency hotels.

The city now has an estimated 15,000 units left, 9,000 downtown.

Approximately 3,000 downtown units are owned and operated by nonprofits serving the homeless.

These nonprofits have been buying and rehabilitating SROs with the goal of preserving low-income housing. But soaring property values have made it difficult to acquire additional buildings.

An estimated 8,500 people are living in some 6,000 privately owned downtown residency hotels, many of which have attracted attention from developers.

Should the city lose this housing, these residents could end up on the streets of Skid Row, adding to the nation's largest homeless population and compounding the housing crisis, Dennison said.

Average monthly rent in downtown SROs is \$450 a month for a 150-square-foot room, Dennison said.

Frontiera said his monthly average is closer to \$350.

"They're paying a lot, especially if you consider the conditions they put up with," Glenn said.

"No one is forced to rent here," Frontier said. "Let's build some housing for these people. The city has lots of

unused land."

The Frontier is in the city's Rent Escrow Account Program for various long-standing code violations. Under this program, tenants' rents can be placed in escrow until mandated repairs are completed.

Sabo, who now lives on the 5th floor, said many of his neighbors from upper floors were forced out.

"I can't stress enough the kind of intimidation they put on you," he said.

Frontiera said he does not intimidate anyone and said the top five floors were emptied "through attrition."

"People check out," he said. "Nobody was kicked out; nobody was relocated."

As for the building's condition, he said the tenants destroy their rooms.

"I think people are damaging their individual units," he said. "These buildings are not designed to house people long term. Women with children shouldn't be living here. But we can't discriminate."

But residents say Frontiera has depended on long-term residents, including women and children, for many years.

"These people have been supporting him for years," Sabo said. "The poor man pays for the band, and the rich man dances."

The city attorney's office obtained an injunction against Frontiera in 2003 for nuisance activity, mostly focused on drug activity.

He was ordered to add security and evict people who have been convicted of drug offenses. Diamond said misdemeanor charges also are pending against Frontiera for fire code violations.

Dennison said the 2003 injunction should have addressed abuses perpetrated against residents, rather than treating the hotel as just a nuisance to the neighborhood.

"If the original injunction had anything to do with tenant rights," Dennison said, "we wouldn't be in the spot that we're in."