

HOUSING

Saigon Centre...

continued from page 1

female tenants to gain access.

"They break in so many times, myself, I replaced the locks more than 10 times," said Tran, adding the FVAM has spent \$15,000 fixing locks and reinforcing doors wrecked from being forced open.

"Before, we chased them out...after that, we begged them, 'OK, we let you guys in, just for like 15 minutes, half an hour and stay, and keep the place clean and leave, don't damage anything,'" said Tran.

The desperate appeal did not work. Squatters came and went as they pleased, with as many as 30 in the building at a time. He says stairwells were used as a toilet, and significant damage was caused to six suites. One of the tenants was robbed of money and pushed out of her wheelchair, Tran says, while he was threatened with knives and a gun.

When *STREETS* visited the building in November a metal side door had been taken off its hinges by intruders the night before.

Suites used by squatters were littered with clothing, food and needles, and walls were marred by holes and graffiti.

Police would remove the squatters when called, Tran said, but they would always return.

The situation improved soon after Vanessa Wiedeman, rental safety coordinator at Spence Neighbourhood Association (SNA), visited the Saigon Centre with a co-worker in early November. She had heard rumours about things happening in the building and became concerned for the safety of the elderly tenants.

Wiedeman and SNA staff met with and advised Ba Van Nguyen, the FVAM president at the time who has since died.

"We had a long conversation that was really great. He said squatters was an issue, for sure, that they didn't really know how to handle," said Wiedeman.

SNA advised the FVAM to get a professional locksmith to strengthen the exterior doors, and in the following days pry guards and reinforced hinges were installed. At the end of January, Tran told *STREETS* the door upgrades had stopped



Hien Tran, president of the Free Vietnamese Association of Manitoba, surveys garbage left in a suite. The two-bedroom suite was one of six with damage caused by squatters, including broken plumbing fixtures and walls marred by holes and graffiti. Photo Sean Ledwich

forced entries, and FVAM members have kept watch to ensure intruders aren't entering the building on the heels of tenants. They have also educated tenants to not allow strangers into the building.

Wiedeman said she returned to the building two days after her initial visit and the FVAM had already done a lot of cleaning.

"It was a completely different building...they cleaned up the stairwells, they cleaned out a couple of suites."

Wiedeman says Manitoba Public Health also visited the building and was extremely helpful, choosing to work with the landlord to find solutions in the best interest of tenants rather than levy fines.

Wiedeman and SNA staff have also met with the FVAM and representatives from the City of Winnipeg's Community Development Division to talk about ideas to secure funding to repair suites and maintain the building. That effort is ongoing.

"The building is in desperate need of a lot of repairs and they have no funding," said Wiedeman.

Nguyen and Tran both said the Saigon Centre, which hosts the Vietnamese Cultural Centre on the ground floor, is in a dire financial situation. Tran said the building's future is uncertain if they cannot repair suites to generate more rent money. Only 32 of 54 suites are rented now, and they have a list of people waiting to move in. They said the rest need repairs stemming from

a period when Manitoba Housing funded six years of third-party management at the building or from damage caused by squatters.

Wiedeman says SNA will continue working on ways to help the Saigon Centre preserve its affordable housing. Currently the rent is set at about 32 per cent of income.

She says Winnipeg's West End has seen too many older buildings taken over by developers and rent increased to levels unaffordable for people on low incomes.

"It's not meeting the needs of our community, so we're trying to help with this building...we can't keep losing more buildings."

Selling Wolseley, West Broadway and Winnipeg's West End for 25 Years.

"Alternatively yours"

Chris Krawchenko
Phone 204-291-1110
krawshaw@mts.net



MAXIMUM
Realty Ltd.
adj. "The Greatest Possible"

LISA NAYLOR
MLA for Wolseley



204-792-2773
101- 686 Portage Avenue
Lisa.Naylor@yourmanitoba.ca

Hiring a lawyer can be different from what you expect

You're not just the neighbourhood that we do business in, you are our neighbours in life. Whether it is buying a home, settling a loved one's affairs, starting a business, or planning for the future, we will make sure that we treat you like a friend, because often, you are.

Come in and see how we're doing law differently.
Sincerely,
Gerrit Theule, Tim Brown, and Kara Hague

Wolseley Law LLP
303 - 960 Portage Avenue at Lipton
204-977-1706
www.wolseleylaw.ca

- Wills and Estates
- Real Estate
- Small Business and Non-Profit
- Family Law
- Civil Litigation
- Government Tribunals



Fire crews responded to a house fire the morning of Jan 27 at 510 Young Street. It took many hours to contain the blaze, shutting down traffic for most of the day. No one is believed to have been inside the home and no injuries were reported. Photo Bev Solomon