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Statement from the City of Pacifica Following Decision to Uphold Mandatory Evacuation of Coastal Apartments

The Pacifica Emergency Preparedness and Safety Commission voted unanimously on Wednesday to uphold the City of Pacifica's decision to evacuate the building at 310 Esplanade in January.

The following is a statement from City Manager Lorie Tinfow:

"We are pleased by the Commission's decision to uphold the mandatory evacuation of the 310 Esplanade apartments," said Pacifica City Manager Lorie Tinfow. "Their decision validates our assessment that the worsening conditions on the bluffs posed an imminent risk to residents and left the structure unsafe for residents – particularly in the event of an earthquake or other unforeseen disaster."

"While the majority of residents have found new homes, the City will continue to work with the Pacifica Resource Center to provide assistance for residents who have been displaced by the emergency conditions," Tinfow said.

Background:

The Pacifica Emergency Preparedness and Safety Commission voted unanimously on Wednesday to uphold the City's mandatory evacuation of the apartments at 310 Esplanade

Ave. to protect resident safety. The Commission will confirm a written summary of the decision on April 20.

Pacifica Chief Building Official Mike Cully “yellow-tagged” the apartments at 310 Esplanade Ave. on Jan. 25, 2016, and declared the structures uninhabitable after El Nino-related storms caused wave-driven erosion of the adjacent bluffs. A yellow-tag designation means residents are allowed to access the buildings only to remove belongings.

Relocation Assistance for Residents

The City has worked with the American Red Cross to provide emergency shelter and the Pacifica Resource Center to coordinate relief until residents are able to find new housing. Of the households displaced, 14 have already found permanent housing.

The City has also sought outside funding for financial aid to assist evacuees. To date, San Mateo County has committed approximately \$20,000 through Measure A sales tax for security deposits, rent assistance and to help cover motel stays as residents search for new housing. Several residents with Housing Authority vouchers are also being assisted by Abode Services, an agency contracted by the Housing Authority to help San Mateo County residents with vouchers find housing.

The Linda Mar Safeway has also provided \$2,500 in gift cards to displaced residents of 310 Esplanade Ave. and a Pacifica Winter Storms fund has been set up online and continues to accept donations to provide further assistance.

“We are dedicating our efforts to providing the resources and support needed by the displaced households during this difficult time,” said Anita Rees, executive director of the Pacifica Resource Center. “While forced transition is never easy, we want residents to know that we are here to help. Resources are available and we have connected with every resident impacted by this emergency, offering them support as they have needed it.”

Background on 310 Esplanade

City officials say the appeal filed by Millard Tong, the owner of 310 Esplanade Ave. and the recently demolished 320 Esplanade, Bart Willoughby, a former building resident, and several others ignores years of warnings by the City regarding the bluff’s progressive erosion and disregards the findings of a geotechnical expert, officials said.

An independent analysis by Principle Geotechnical Engineer Ted Sayre of Cotton, Shires and Associates, Inc. confirmed the need to yellow-tag the structure, calling the building’s precipitous location on the crumbling bluffs “untenable and a clear danger to occupants.”

“The current combination of over-steepened bluffs combined with the ongoing El Nino storm season results in a high level of risk to certain living space areas on the property,” Sayre wrote

in a Feb. 17 analysis for the City. “Because of this high risk for over-stressing of patios, balconies and foundations, we have recommended that public access be severely restricted.”

Meanwhile, City officials say Tong was well aware of the crumbling conditions and could have paid to have the cliff shored up beneath his property – as owners of the nearby Land’s End Apartment Homes and the Bluffs at Pacifica Apartments had done successfully – yet he chose not to.

“Mr. Tong had every opportunity to mitigate this, yet he chose not only to ignore the rapid deterioration of the bluffs beneath his property but risk the public’s health and safety,” Tinfow said. “Unfortunately, his tenants are now forced to deal with the consequences.”

This is not the first of Tong’s buildings evacuated due to coastal erosion. In 2010, the City evacuated and “red-tagged” the 20-unit apartment building at 320 Esplanade after storm-driven coastal erosion rendered it similarly uninhabitable. The building was demolished in mid-March.

In July 2015, the City was forced to initiate code enforcement action against Tong related to the poor condition of 320 Esplanade. A few months later, in October 2015, the City filed a criminal misdemeanor complaint for violations of the Pacifica Municipal Code related to the condition of 320 Esplanade.

On February 23, Tong pleaded no contest to two charges and was sentenced to three years’ probation and ordered to cooperate with the City’s efforts to abate the dangerous conditions at 320 Esplanade and pay full restitution for the costs of that abatement.

Meanwhile, Tong filed for bankruptcy in March 2015. The City is participating in the case in an effort to monitor available assets and recover any costs incurred at 320 Esplanade, including the cost of last week’s demolition.

Although both Willoughby and Tong cited the need for a second geotechnical opinion related to 310 Esplanade, neither submitted one as part of their appeal.

“We’re hopeful that the Commission will review the facts of this appeal and support the City’s decision to protect residents before conditions worsened,” Tinfow said.