

Editorial: Take swift action to make Washington Village livable

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Photo: Erik Trautmann / Hearst Connecticut Media

Washington Village is mostly vacant, but 150 people do still live there while new buildings are constructed.

The relationship between substandard housing and health problems has been well established.

From poor sanitation to inadequate ventilation, faulty plumbing to gas leaks, housing conditions are key determinants of physical and mental health — not surprising, given Americans spend 70 percent of their time inside residences.

That made it all the more disturbing this week to learn that some of Norwalk's public housing residents are living under conditions best described

as deplorable.

Washington Village, the state's oldest public housing development, is in the process of being replaced. After 77 years, it's about time.

Until better housing supplants it, however, 150 people are still calling it home.

Newly appointed Councilman Ernie Dumas, a District B Democrat, summoned city officials to the Day Street complex over the weekend amid residents' reports of raw sewage, a flooded basement, a gas leak, and a surfeit of rats.

Rick Reardon, a South Norwalk resident, tailed one rodent to an open bulkhead door where he discovered more rats swimming in 5 feet of standing water in the basement of building two. With the bulkhead open, the flooded basement was accessible to all, including children.

Dumas said he saw toilet paper and feces enter a trench along Day Street, fenced off as part of a construction site but within 20 feet of occupied housing. A leaking sewage pipe has since been capped off.

Deputy Fire Chief Ed Prescott said he smelled "a light intermittent odor" of natural gas. An Eversource spokesman said repairs would be made when the source of the odor is found.

Occupants who smell gas in their homes are advised not to light matches or turn on or off lights and appliances, but to leave the premises and call 911.

In addition to the aforementioned health hazards, Washington Village residents have been living with dust and noise from ongoing projects related to the rebuilding. They include \$8 million worth of infrastructure improvements to Day and Raymond streets, to raise their elevation as protection against flooding, and reconstruction of the adjacent Ryan Park, where soil contaminated by PCBs has been removed.

The Norwalk Housing Authority, in conjunction with Trinity Financial, is replacing Washington Village in a three-phase process under the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development Choice Neighborhoods Program.

The new mixed-use development will provide 136 public housing units, 67 workforce housing units, and 70 market-rate units. So far, one 10-unit building on Day Street is occupied; another, with 70 units, is scheduled to be occupied in August.

Eventually, Washington Village will be razed and the remaining residents relocated. Until they are, it behooves the city to take swift action to right the wrongs and make the place livable.

It's been said that the true measure of a society can be found in how it treats its most vulnerable members.

By that yardstick, we're falling dangerously short.