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Residents Getting Action At an Embattled Building

By RACHELLE GARBARINE

Apartment life has not always been easy at the Chatsworth. On and off for the last three decades, the rent-stabilized building on the West Side of Manhattan has been the scene of major landlord-tenant battles, pushing it into financial and physical decline and since the late 1980's into the hands of a court-appointed receiver.

But over the last 21 months, conditions seem to have improved at the 169-unit prewar structure, made up of two interconnected buildings at 340 and 344 West 72d Street, at Riverside Drive. In that time, Joseph B. Goldman, the property's second and current receiver, hired the Nelson Management Group of Forest Hills, Queens, which manages some 1,000 apartments in New York City, to deal with the building's problems. Working with tenants, Mr. Goldman and Nelson Management have stabilized the building's finances, increasing rent collections and decreasing operating expenses. Also, about \$1 million in improvements are being made to the turn-of-the-century, Beaux Arts-style building, which is a city landmark.

The work has included replacing an elevator, out of service for 13 years, and installing new gas pipes, water towers and a security system. Restoring the building's main facade, with its intermittent bursts of sculptural decoration, will also begin in two weeks. And as apartments have become vacant they have been renovated at up to \$22,000 each.

Some tenants say the signs of change have been heartening. "Generally, we are pleased with the efforts, given the limited financial resources they have to work with," said Richard Seader, a member of the Chatsworth Tenants Association and a 35-year resident.

Henry Saltzman, another member and a seven-year resident, added, "Living conditions at the building are better than they have been in years." Still, they said, there is a long way to go before the Chatsworth's financial and physical turnaround is complete.

Opened in 1904, the Chatsworth was typical of Manhattan's grand old apartment buildings. It had residences of up to 15 rooms with river views. Those amenities have disappeared, and the apartments have since been carved into smaller studios to three-bedrooms with 400 to 1,500 square feet of space.

After the mid-1960's, the Chats-

worth, owned by Lenore Dean of Manhattan, was the object of tenant complaints to the state about a lack of improvements, rent overcharges and weakened services.

Many residents left and the state ordered rent reductions for those who remained. There was a rent strike by some tenants. The cycle continued until the state Attorney General's office, joined by tenants, filed suit in 1984 against Mrs. Dean. The building was taken over by the courts three years later.

The first court-appointed receiver ran the building through 1990. But he never delivered the hoped-for improvements and fell behind on nearly \$1 million in real estate tax payments to the city.

That year Mr. Goldman, a retired housing court judge, was appointed the receiver and in the intervening years has settled many of the rent disputes. Though a few cases remain, rents have generally been restored to legal levels, he said. Violations against the building are still on record at the city, but Mr. Goldman said they were being resolved.

Mr. Goldman says the Chatsworth is still owned by the Chatsworth Realty Corporation, of which Mrs. Dean is the sole stockholder. Mrs. Dean could take back control of the building by making an application to Justice Karla Moskowitz of New York State Supreme Court, who has jurisdiction over the matter, and proving that all relevant rent laws and administrative codes will be followed. Mrs. Dean could not be reached for comment.

Robert S. Nelson, president of Nelson Management, said the 15 apartments that have become vacant since his company took over have been rented at higher rents allowed under the vacancy decontrol provisions of the rent-regulation laws. In those cases where rents rose to \$2,000, the unit became deregulated and could command market rents.

Rents range from \$249 to \$3,350 a month, depending largely on whether they are subject to rent regulations. Rents for apartments that become vacant depend both on size and on whether they have been deregulated. A one-bedroom apartment still under regulation that became available rented for \$1,450 a month. Deregulated apartments have rented for \$2,295 for a two-bedroom and \$3,350 for a three-bedroom.

The building's rent roll has also increased to \$2.1 million from \$1.5 million, Mr. Nelson said, and its outstanding bills reduced to \$200,000 from \$1.38 million.