

Sentinel and Enterprise Opinion: Devenscrest tenants should not be treated this way



Devenscrest residents and their supporters during a protest rally back in 2021. State Housing Secretary Ed Augustus will be meeting with Devenscrest residents on Tuesday, Jan. 30, 2024. (Julia Malakie/Lowell Sun)

By STATE SEN JAMIE ELDRIDGE and D-AMBER HOULE
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It has been more than two years since Brady Sullivan Properties, an out-of-state real estate investment company with a troubling history, purchased 110 rental homes at Devenscrest in Ayer – and immediately sent eviction notices to some of the tenants and said it intended to displace the rest.

Half those families and individuals are now gone, removed from their homes by the stick of threatened eviction, or the carrot of a small financial incentive to leave. Many of their former homes have been given a coat of paint and a makeover and put on the market for twice the rent or

more. Some units that rented for \$1,000 a month are now being advertised at anywhere from \$2,200 to \$2,400 – prices not affordable for the working families who have long called Devenscrest home.

The remaining residents wonder every single day if they are going to be able to remain in their homes, if their children will be able to stay in Ayer schools, if more of their neighbors will soon be gone and – most dauntingly – where they will ever find homes they can afford in Massachusetts if Brady Sullivan lives up to its threats and continues efforts to remove them.

Brady Sullivan began no-fault legal eviction proceedings against 13 tenants, but dropped them without explanation, leaving the remaining tenants unsure when the next shoe would fall. The Ayer Faith community has rallied around the tenants, urging an end to evictions and asking that the residents stay in their homes at an affordable price. Legislators, too, have attempted to deal with the company, calling for a halt on evictions and connecting tenants to legal aid. Meanwhile, the Devenscrest Tenants Association has been active in exposing issues like suspected mold and asbestos violations in some of the housing units and demanding the state Department of Environmental Protection take action.

What is happening in Devenscrest is important, first off, because people should not be treated this way. But what is happening at Devenscrest is also a perfect example of why affordable homes in Massachusetts are disappearing.

Brady Sullivan Properties swooped into Ayer because the Devenscrest homes are inexpensive, the rents are low, and as speculators, they see an opportunity to get rid of the people who call Devenscrest home and can't afford high rents, touch up the housing, and double or triple the rents. They are taking naturally occurring affordable housing – housing that working families can pay for without any subsidy or help – and turning these units into what Ayer and the rest of this state does not need – more unaffordable housing.

According to a recent Metropolitan Area Planning Council report, one in five homes sold in Eastern Massachusetts from 2004 to 2018 went to individuals or groups like Brady Sullivan – private investors scooping up lower cost housing so they can either jack up rents, or flip the property to someone else who will.

Exacerbating the worries for the people who live in Devenscrest is the history of Brady Sullivan and their record in dealing with properties, and people.

In their native New Hampshire, and in projects in Massachusetts and Rhode Island, Brady Sullivan has a long history of violations not just of tenant rights, but of health laws on mold and asbestos, and a long history of fines, violations, and lawsuits.

There is a potential win-win solution: an interested buyer for the property who would keep the apartments affordable, treat tenants with respect and give the owner a profit. The Devenscrest Tenants Association, working with the nonprofit Mass Law Reform Institute, has met with a responsible affordable housing developer that wants to buy Devenscrest and preserve it as affordable – and is willing to give Brady Sullivan a \$4 million profit to leave. So far, Brady Sullivan has said no.

The people who live at Devenscrest take care of their homes and want to stay in their community. If we're going to make Massachusetts an affordable place for working families to live, we need to help them.

Jamie Eldridge is the Senator for the Middlesex and Worcester District that includes Ayer. D-Amber Houle is a preschool teacher in Ayer and has lived at Devenscrest since 2009. She resides there with her four-year-old son.