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MARCH 17, 2023 | VOL. 60, NO. 49

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Dominium renters: 'Put a cap on it'

■ At the Capitol, Twin Cities area seniors protest rent increases, urge passage of rent control measure

By Ian Wreisner
Staff Writer

Minnesota seniors took to the halls of the Minnesota Capitol demanding that their low-income housing situations remain affordable.

After protesting rent increases in front of Dominion apartment offices in August 2022, a coalition of Dominion tenants brought their cause to the Capitol on March 14. Senator John Hoffman, DFL-Champlin, held a rally with bipartisan legislators in the capitol rotunda attended by state and local legislators, as well as Dominion tenants and activists, to protest a 12% rent increase from Dominion and call on legislators to enact a 3% rent increase cap.

"First of all, I see my grandparents," Hoffman told ABC Newspapers. "This is the Greatest Generation. You want to let people know that if this is Dominion's way, or anybody's way of saying thanks, this is wrong."

Dominium is one of the largest affordable housing providers in the country, with more than 40 locations in the Twin Cities. Just how affordable they are has been under scrutiny, however, as low-income seniors across the Twin Cities are fighting back against rent increases and are claiming Dominion is charging hidden fees.

"Their model is based on



Seniors brought signs advocating for a 3% rent cap to a rally, hosted by Sen. John Hoffman, that took place in the Capitol rotunda on Tuesday, March 14. The seniors were protesting Dominion rent increases while asking legislatures to pass a rent control measure.

Photo by Ian Wreisner

maximization," Sen. Jim Abeler, R-Anoka, told ABC Newspapers. "There's all kinds of lapses, it's simply abuse. This is elder abuse."

Abeler brought this up after discussing Dominion's charge of \$75 for parking, which is also the subject of a 2021 lawsuit against Dominion. The lawsuit was filed by Bloomington-based nonprofit HOME Line on behalf of Dominion tenants, stating Dominion has "misrepresented the costs relat-

ed to parking construction and improvements" in order to receive Low-Income Housing Tax Credits for parking spaces.

If such tax credits are taken, the low-income housing provider may not charge for parking. The lawsuit alleges Dominion took the credits and still charged residents for parking.

Dominium media contact Sandi Scott, with public relations firm Tunheim Partners, told ABC Newspapers that "Dominium provides free sur-

face lot parking to all residents. Those that choose to rent a spot in the underground garage are charged a monthly fee."

Legislators like Hoffman and Abeler got involved after working with the seniors to keep rent affordable. A letter signed by U.S. senators Amy Klobuchar and Tina Smith along with federal representatives Angie Craig, Betty McCollum, Ilhan Omar and Dean Phillips in September 2022 asked the company to justify their increases. No legal or legislative action had taken

place until March 7 when Hoffman and Abeler introduced a bill (SF 2590) that proposes capping rent increases at 5% for certain low-income rental projects that use residential rental bonds.

"Here's the thing that boggles my mind: You have a \$36 million project, I'm going to give you \$11 or \$12 million as a direct tax credit on that project," Hoffman said. "And this is your way of saying thank you? That's not OK. It's wrong."

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Several Dominion tenants made baseball caps with the phrase, "Don't be afraid... put a cap on it."

Photo by Ian Wreisner

Rent cap

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Dominium's building affordable housing often qualifies their projects for Tax Increment Financing. Dominion's building affordable housing often qualifies them for Tax Increment Financing, where a local government can subsidize a development project with projected property taxes that will be generated by the new development.

"They've gotten hundreds of millions of dollars (over multiple projects)," Abeler added. "There's a problem with their corporate ethic. Their corporate ethic is not a Minnesota value. It's, 'How much can I get for me, and too bad for you.' These people come in, (and) in many cases they've gotten rid of a place that was cheaper."

Abeler met Dominion resident Janet Snell, a woman who had a \$600 payment on her home. She wanted to downsize, and ended up paying \$1,500 a month now when she moved into senior living facility apartment.

Snell, a tenant at Bren Road Station in Minnetonka, had her rent increased twice by Dominion prior to moving in.

At the Capitol rally, Snell told the crowd she did not want to depend on her children as she neared her 73rd birthday, and started to have questions about her retirement savings in the face of increasing rent.

"What do you do when you outlive your money, where do you go?" she asked. "I have (atrial fibrillation). I'm on blood thinners. And I know that taking that entire bottle of blood thinners will take me on to the next phase. People laugh, but it's not funny, honey. That's where some of us are at."

Jan Bragelman, one of the protest organizers at River North Senior Living Apartments in Coon Rapids, shared with ABC Newspapers that the bill to cap rent increases is on a tight deadline. If the bill is not passed by the end of the current legislative session on May 22, Bragelman suspects that Dominion could use July's annual Area Median Income report from the Housing and Urban Development Department to increase rent in the double-digits once again.

"They're trying to cap the rent at 5%, which is what most states have, but everyone here is asking for 3%," Bragelman said. "Be brave, be innovative, go to 3% for seniors on fixed incomes! The economy, the inflation, the weather, it's not going to get better."

Dominium Corporate Affairs Officer Paula Prahel released a statement on the rent-cap legislation after the March 14 rally. Prahel said Dominion recognizes the concerns of residents, but noted that the state lacks sufficient affordable housing.

"Inflation, driven in part by a housing shortage, is causing rents to increase beyond some household budgets, even for residents living in already rent-capped apartments like those Dominion manages," Prahel wrote. "Property managers rely on monthly rent payments because they are essential to pay mortgages, keep apartment buildings up to date, staffed, and maintained in a way that keeps affordable housing welcomed in communities across the state."

Concerns over maintenance were brought forth during August's protests, and again at the Capitol. Back in August, Legends of Champlin tenant Ronda Hassinger waited six months for a repair to her bathroom. Jackson Sweet-

ney, legislative assistant for Sen. Nicole Mitchell, DFL-Woodbury, spoke on Mitchell's behalf and recalled hearing about retaliation for maintenance requests.

Prahel added that Dominion also offered a plan for keeping apartments affordable that did not include a rent cap. They offered a two-point strategy, saying that rental assistance should be expanded in the state through Section 8 and advocated for affordable housing infrastructure bonds.

"These two complementary strategies, which help build more homes where rents are already capped and which help renters pay rent that works with their individual incomes, are popular with stakeholders across the housing spectrum, including renters and building managers," Prahel wrote. "Furthermore, they address one of the main cost drivers: insufficient supply of homes."

Columbia Heights Mayor Amada Márquez Simula was also in attendance and spoke at Tuesday's rally. She provided further comment to ABC Newspapers, saying the Columbia Heights City Council members stand by their seniors and pointed out the problematic nature of using the AMI to determine rents for seniors who may only be receiving Social Security.

"I would like the people of Columbia Heights to know the seniors are coming together at (Columbia Heights-located Dominion property) Legends and we support our neighbors in Columbia Heights," Márquez Simula said. "The thing that people can do is contact their elected officials at the state and federal level to say that we need our seniors not to be judged by the AMI, because they're on a fixed income. They should not be

judged against people who are making an income."

While Dominion has publicly been using the AMI to justify rent increases, there were accusations of greed, gentrification and corporate interests being brought up by tenants at the rally.

When Abeler went in front of the crowd to speak, echoing Hoffman in stating that the Capitol is to be of public use for Minnesota citizens. He specifically recommended heading to local representatives and Gov. Tim Walz's office to leave letters many of them had brought along.

"Some things are just wrong," Abeler said. "The governor's office is just down the hall there just a little bit. And I suggest you leave him a note. This is something that we totally agree on, that people should not be abused in a place that subsidizes public money. It's not a place where the feds and the states find a way to give people money to invest so they can just turn around and rob people."

Hoffman and Abeler's bill will move through the Minnesota Senate, along with a companion bill in the Minnesota House (HF 2676). Abeler said his bill has already met resistance, but he assured those in attendance that he was committed to passing it.

"Some of the Housing (Committee) people are pushing back on this, I have about two words for them: Too bad!" Abeler said. "They say, 'What if Dominion might not want to invest in another property across the state?' And I say..."

The crowd caught on to his pattern and joined Abeler in response:

"Too bad!"

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