

John S. Perry House residents have opportunity to stay

By Preston Knight

Daily Staff Writer

WOODSTOCK — The Virginia Housing Development Authority has admitted to being wrong in establishing reasonable rent for residents of the John S. Perry House, meaning those who faced the prospect of moving out have an opportunity to stay.

Sharon Fairburn, the housing choice voucher program director for the housing authority, wrote a letter dated March 29 to Nancy Glickman, of Blue Ridge Legal Services, which represents the residents, indicating federally subsidized properties were used as comparable units to the Perry House apartments when they should not have been.

Because of that, the vouchers tenants were to receive were devalued. The U.S. Department

of Housing and Urban Development notified the local authority of the mistake, Fairburn wrote.

"VHDA volunteered to conduct another rent reasonableness study to comply with the intent and language of the law and correct our mistake," she wrote.

The Section 8 contract at the Perry House was due to end April 30, and all residents unable to pay rent were to leave at that point. For financial reasons, Benjamin Weitz, of Shenandoah Associates Limited Partnership, had wanted to raise rents from \$655 to \$720 for a one-bedroom apartment and from \$790 to \$869 for a two-bedroom apartment.

In addition to admitting wrongdoing, the housing authority's latest comparability study, completed March 29, found that Weitz's rent requests were too high, and asked

instead for Weitz to establish \$673 as the price for a one-bedroom unit and \$763 for two bedrooms. Those prices that can be assisted with the use of a voucher come May 1.

Weitz accepted the change.

"It's a fair and reasonable amount," he said Monday.

Weitz added that he still wished rent was higher. However, it may not matter in the long run as he has interest in selling the property.

"If somebody walked up today and gave me the right price, I'd sell it," he said. "Everything has a price."

With the latest news, Weitz, who received a fair amount of criticism in a meeting with residents and family members last month, said he feels vindicated now that the housing authority has admitted its error.

"This finally says it, 'I was right,'" he said.

Yet no matter who wound up being at fault, a number of residents have had to change addresses thanks to the ordeal. Weitz said there are 16 vacancies at the Perry House from residents who left between the time of the March meeting and last week's letter from Fairburn stating that vouchers could be used to stay there.

Stan and Sandra Richards, who have lived at the facility since November, said they are moving out on Thursday, along with her parents.

"I'll miss some of the people," said Stan Richards, 65, "but I ain't going to miss nothing about the building."

Meanwhile, Joann Brill, 50, said she isn't sure whether she can get out of a commitment paper she signed for an apartment in Broadway.

However, the only reason she remains at the Perry House is because of her husband, who is battling problems after a fall last year, she said.

"If I had my way, I'd have been gone last month," said Brill, a resident for 15 months.

On a positive note, she said knowing that she can at least remain at the Perry House has relieved some stress, which she wants to avoid at all costs after suffering two heart attacks before she lived in the facility.

Some residents, however, are more than glad to stay. At the top of the list is Kathleen Keenan, who pushed Blue Ridge Legal Services to help.

"I was a pest," she said.

Moving to another facility, Keenan said, would have been too much work. And it's not labor she was talking about.

"I don't want to have to make new friends," she said.

Ruth Heffner, 85, the longest-tenured resident ever at the facility — she's been there nearly 23 years — was even more blunt on why moving was a bad option.

"It's really home to us," she said.

According to management, 11 people submitted paperwork Monday to stay at the facility, having learned that vouchers could be used to assist in paying rent.

Though some residents fear Weitz could look to raise rents again and thus force older residents out in favor of a working-class base, the same people say they view him in a little better light now.

"I don't think he's lily-white," Keenan said, "but I don't think HUD is either."

► Contact Preston Knight at pknight@nvdaily.com