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History of Arlandria eviction protests

BY KATE RUTHERFORD

In the 1980s, the neighborhood of Arlandria, now commonly referred to as Chirilagua, was the home of a growing community of Latin American immigrants. By 1986, the affordable apartments in the neighborhood housed primarily working-class African Americans and Latin Americans.

There were few other options for affordable housing in Alexandria, so when the property was sold to developers for renovation, the community had to organize. This story of those protests is based on work by Krystyn Moon, Ph.D. You can learn more in her newest book “Proximity to Power” or search for her blogpost for the Urban History Association.

The apartments, Layton Estates, were purchased in 1986 by Washington, D.C.-based de-

velopers Conrad Cafritz and John Freeman and the Artery Organization, a Bethesda real estate development company. The developers planned to renovate 1,057 units of the low-income apartments and gentrify the neighborhood, but first, the current residents had to leave.

Some residents received eviction notices, and those who did not would have been forced out by severe rent increases. Around 5,000 people faced the possibility of losing their homes.

Tenants protested the evictions directly to City Council. On Feb. 21, 1987, around 200 protesters marched from Arlandria to City Hall. Their goal was to persuade Council to seize the property to keep rent prices low. When Council saw the protesters outside, they adjourned.

Council members left the building for a break and re-

turned to a meeting room occupied by the protesters. The mayor and City Council did not agree to their request, but the protesters had succeeded in making their efforts known to the city.

Around the same time, some tenants from the Dominion Gardens and Bruce Street apartment complexes, which were part of the Layton Estates, filed a lawsuit against the Artery Organization on the grounds of racial discrimination. Virginia and the City of Alexandria did not have any rent control policies at the time, so organizers had to find other grounds for legal action.

The tenants claimed that Artery’s attempts to displace the majority black and Hispanic residents of Arlandria violated the Fair Housing Act. The court ordered an injunction against the evictions and delayed the renovations.

The project was ultimately abandoned when real estate prices dropped in the late 1980s and early ‘90s. By 1989, tenants had established the Tenants Support Committee, which later became Tenants and Workers United.

With the help of Alexandria and some federal funding, the Tenants Support Committee was able to purchase a 282-unit complex in 1993. They transformed the complex into the Arlandria-Chirilagua Housing Cooperative, a limited-equity co-op owned and controlled by its residents.

*Historic Alexandria is proud to celebrate Hispanic Heritage Month. For more information on Hispanic Heritage Month in Alexandria, please visit alexandria.gov/HispanicHeritage.*

*Out of the Attic is provided by the Office of Historic Alexandria.*