

## REQUIEM FOR DEBORAH

The fire made the front page and so did the victim. Deborah Schrempf, age 41, perished in a fire at 140-142 Union Avenue two weeks ago. She died of smoke inhalation in a basement apartment where she had been staying. The news of the fire and of Deborah's death have passed from the public's consciousness, but not from our thoughts. Deborah's death was a tragedy, one which was eminently preventable.

"Let me state that everyone, meaning the tenants and the community, wins if SMOC secures these funds and is able to rehabilitate these properties, and the tenants and the Town ultimately are losers if we are not able to secure the funds and acquire the properties. The positives for everyone are as follows:

- . Existing affordable rental housing stock is preserved.
- . Severe blight in a number of the buildings is renovated, thereby creating better housing that would upgrade existing property values. In fact, the blight is so severe in one of these properties, that I discussed the situation with the Town of Framingham's Fire Chief, Michael Smith, who has written a letter of support for our activities (see attached).
- . There will be a significant amount of renovation work, which will bring additional construction and renovation jobs into the community.

In conclusion, we thank the Board for its consideration of our proposal and respectfully request the Board's endorsement of our application."

...Excerpt from Memo to Town of Framingham Board of Selectmen 10/13/92

The above excerpt was written to the Selectmen in an unsuccessful attempt to gain their support for an application for capital funding from the state.

Our point is not to lay blame for this tragedy. To be honest, we feel somewhat responsible. SMOC tried to purchase the Union Avenue buildings. We tried for two and a half years without success, finally abandoning our plans in October of 1993, when we finally informed the owner that we could not make the deal work and had to back out.

The building where Deborah died was an accident waiting to happen. It was part of a three building complex purchased by the present owner during the hyperinflated real estate market of the 80's. This owner never was able to make the buildings work financially and it didn't take long for his difficulties to affect the day to day management of the project. The buildings began to deteriorate

physically and proper management, specifically around tenant selection, became sporadic, at best. The addresses of these properties started showing up with regular frequency in the Middlesex News Police Beat.

Why did we want to buy those buildings? Because we had hoped to renovate them, and to bring professional management practices to the three-building quadrangle on Union Avenue, which was home to over 45 tenants. As part of the renovations, a full sprinkler system would have been installed, and the basement apartment where Deborah died would have been eliminated.

There is a long and complicated history to our two and a half year attempt. A significant amount of staff time and energy was put into trying to make this deal work, all the elements that go into SMOC's acquisition, renovation and management of real estate - getting a decent price from the owner, negotiating a reduced payoff to the present mortgage holder, arranging the financing, finding the public subsidies that are necessary to renovate the facility and structuring all proposals for final approval by a bankruptcy court. We were not successful in our goal despite a long-term effort. Why? There were a lot of reasons, not the least of which is that we, in retrospect, were not as creative, as forceful and as inventive as was necessary to make the deal happen.

There are, of course, other reasons. The buildings were mortgaged for far more than they were worth. This is common with properties SMOC attempts to acquire. We often find buildings purchased by inexperienced owners at a time when property values were rising and rising at astonishing rates, purchased at a time when banks were loaning money to almost any project which came their way. And, when property values eventually fell, and rental income could not meet both mortgage obligations and maintenance needs, the buildings and their tenants were ignored. This building is unfortunately not unique. Our negotiations with the seller and his financiers did not lower the price to a level which would allow both mortgage payments and responsible management of the property.

We were unsuccessful in attempting to get the public subsidies and private financing necessary to complete the acquisition. We were unsuccessful in getting the support of the Selectmen, the bank holding the mortgage was unwilling to "move off the dime," on the amount of money owed to them, and we failed to invent new sources of funds and find more creative solutions to rectify a serious housing problem one block from Town Hall. That failure has left this town with a fire damaged building with a bleak future.

We are writing this article in the hope that the community might have a better understanding of SMOC's mission as it relates to community development and community revitalization. The Union Avenue buildings were the kind of buildings we have targeted to acquire, to rehabilitate, and to professionally manage. It is

discouraging to see that intent lost in the public furor that has been kindled over our property acquisitions, and the fact that "we don't pay taxes and we bring undesirables into the neighborhood." The facts are that SMOC acquires dilapidated, rundown buildings that are a source of trouble. The facts are that SMOC organizes public and private resources to renovate them, bringing jobs and revenue into the town, corrects code violations, installs fire safety systems, and then institutes professional management practices around tenant recruitment, tenant selection, and building maintenance. Professional management means that we don't allow drug dealers to live there. When people have drug habits or prove to be irresponsible neighbors, we intervene. This is not an easy job, and we do not succeed 100% of the time. But if you look at the properties we have acquired you will find that they are uniformly better properties after our acquisition. You will find tenants who are more responsible neighbors and you will see - if you are willing to look with objective eyes - the properties of a landlord striving to be a good corporate citizen.

That is what would have happened at 140-142 Union Avenue. The units would have been renovated, a sprinkler system installed, and the basement apartments would have been eliminated. Many of the tenants who were living there would not have been living there had we been managing the building, and the Framingham police and firemen may not have had to risk their lives in a largely successful rescue effort.

And maybe, just maybe, Deborah Schrempf would still be alive.

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