



Sarasota's Hotel Ranola evicting tenants for renovations

By

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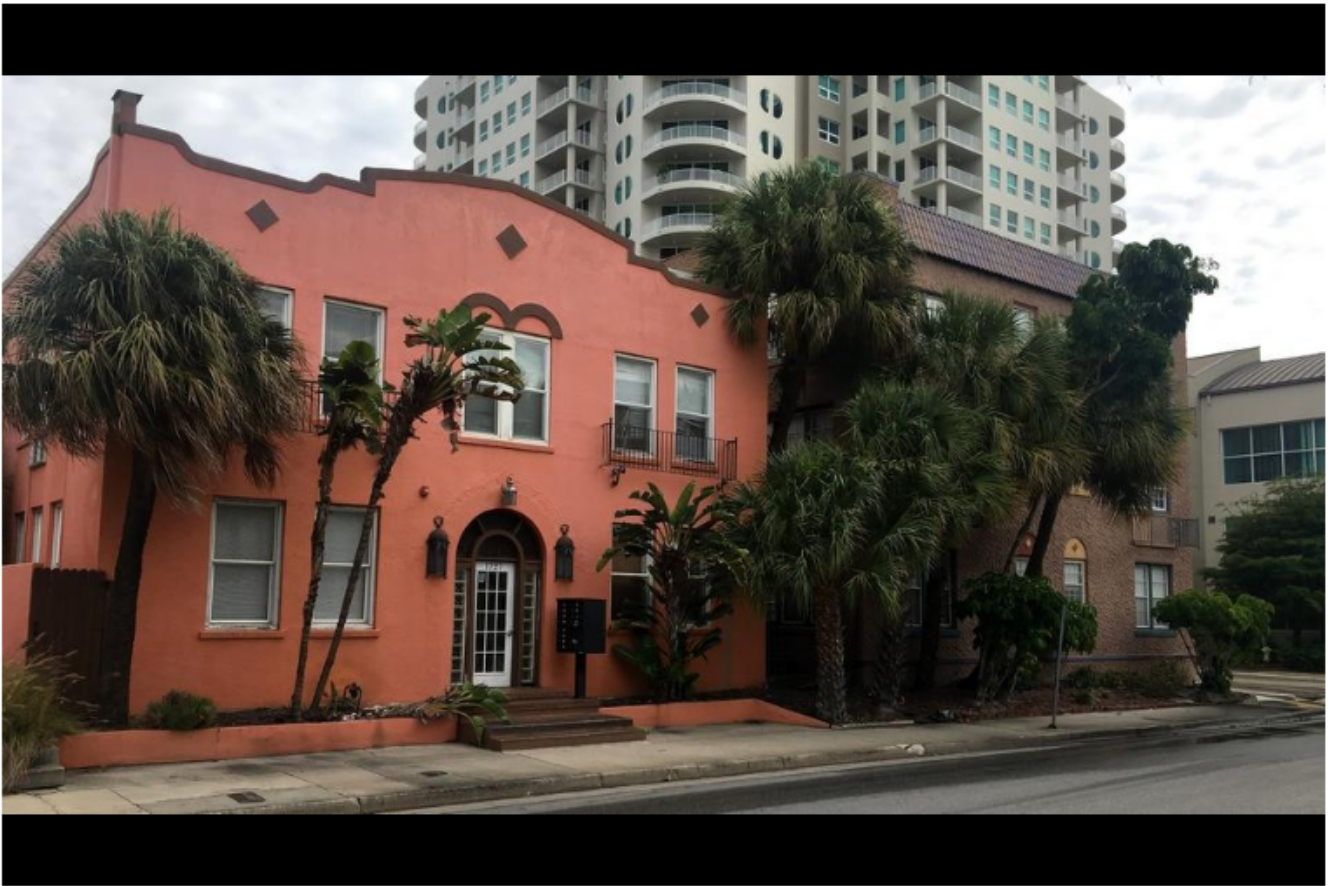
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Posted at 3:10 PM

Updated Apr 9, 2019 at 3:10 PM

New owner calls building a “rat place” on social media and says that work requires people to leave.

Longtime residents of the Hotel Ranola in downtown Sarasota have been told to leave, as the new owner of the boutique hotel plans to renovate the property that was purchased in January.



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EB Ranola Hotel LLC purchased three parcels, including 1727 Ringling Blvd., the Hotel Ranola at 118 Indian Place and 1734 Bamboo Lane for under \$2.8 million in January. [HERALD-TRIBUNE STAFF PHOTO / LAURA FINALDI]

EB Ranola Hotel LLC, registered to Baird Inc. of Sarasota, in January purchased three parcels, including the Hotel Ranola, for about \$2.8 million, Sarasota County records show. The purchase included the hotel, the apartment building next door at 1727 Ringling Blvd. and the parking lot area just north of the hotel at 1734 Bamboo Lane.

The hotel, built in 1926 as an apartment hotel, has residential units on the third floor and hotel rooms on the first and second floors. Joy Briandi, a 10-year resident of the building, received a notice dated March 27 informing her that she was being evicted from her longtime home.

“For various reasons, we have decided not to re-new the lease on the above mentioned unit you now occupy,” the letter reads. It also says that tenants must allow management to show their units to prospective tenants “at all reasonable times.”

That was the first interaction tenants had from the new landlord since the building was purchased in January, Briandi said.

The building has had its problems, Briandi said. It's old, there's no central air conditioning and her kitchen has been leaking for five years. But to Briandi, the bottom line is that living there is much less expensive than it would be almost anywhere else in downtown Sarasota.

She said all her neighbors but one are single women, so for them, keeping housing costs low is a high priority. She currently pays \$895 per month in rent.

Briandi, who is in her early 40s, said most people plan to rent for a few years to save up to buy a house or a condo. But since rent in Sarasota is so expensive, she hasn't been able to put away any money to do the same.

"How do you save for a down payment? My credit score is 800. I have zero debt. I should be able to pay for a condo in Sarasota, Florida," she said. "You can't find affordable housing downtown. I'm about to increase my rent payment to another \$450 a month so I can stay in the area. It's insane."

Eric Baird, founder and CEO of Baird Inc., did not return messages left with his company. He did, however, write on a post on Briandi's Facebook page that third-floor tenants have to be evicted in order for renovations to take place. He said they are on month-to-month leases.

"We have to do this to replace the roof and to fix the water damage in each of those rooms. We will completely renovate those rooms at the same time. Obviously no one can live in those rooms while this is being done," he said. Baird wrote on Facebook that the units have issues like roof leaks, mold and rats.

Baird wrote that the Hotel Ranola's third floor "should be hotel rooms too." The building next door has 10 units for longer term rentals, he said. Briandi said those tenants have seen large increases in their rent.

"You may be okay paying \$800 per month for a leaking, moldy, rat place. But I am not interested in owning and operating one. I wish you luck finding somewhere else you will be happy," Baird wrote on Facebook.

Baird is also one of the owners of downtown Sarasota's Main Plaza mall, with Jesse Biter and David Chessler. Plans for the plaza's redevelopment were on display at the International Council of Shopping Centers Orlando conference in August.

Sarasota is currently facing a shortage of affordable housing options, caused by increases in housing costs and efforts by state lawmakers to shortchange affordable housing program. These factors have forced many to move further and further away from where they work.

City and county commissions have proposed solutions to attempt to solve this problem, including approving 750-square-foot or less multi-family dwellings that some say will be cheaper to build at the county level and the city and county both moving forward with recommendations from affordable housing boards as to how to address the problem. But many challenges still stand in the way.

William Russell, president and CEO of the Sarasota Housing Authority, told the Herald-Tribune's Chris Wille in an interview that it can be difficult to build affordable housing because the costs of construction are the same as if they were building any other kind of housing development.

“Even if you have a pot of money and you have to go out and purchase land, that makes the whole development of affordable housing really difficult. Building housing costs are the same,” Russell said. “If you have to pay market rate for land, and you obviously have to pay market rate for construction right now, which is very high. Permits, impact fees, you add all that stuff up, and it's not affordable if there's no subsidy in the deal. It's impossible to pay all those costs and then charge an affordable rent on the back end.”

To help fix that problem, Russell said his group recommended that profits from the sale of some surplus land in Sarasota should go into a fund for affordable housing, and that a certain percentage of surplus land should not be sold to be reserved specifically for the development of affordable housing.

According to Apartment List, which tracks rent costs in the U.S., the median rent for a studio apartment in March in the city of Sarasota was \$1,004. The median cost for a one-bedroom was \$1,080, and for a two-bedroom, the average rent was \$1,387 in March. Those figures more or less held steady compared to the year before, but are above the state averages in all three categories. The average studio rent in March in Florida was \$831, the state's one-bedroom average was \$965 and its two-bedroom average was \$1,203.

In March 2018, a studio apartment in Sarasota cost \$1,004 on average, a one-bedroom cost \$1,079 and a two-bedroom cost \$1,387 per month.

In Bradenton, the average rent for a studio apartment in March was \$871, one-bedroom rent was \$937 and two-bedroom rent was \$1,203. The year before, those figures were \$853, \$918 and \$1,179, respectively.

Andrea Capek, who has lived in the Hotel Ranola for four years, said she's one of the newer residents. Capek, who like Briandi is also a single woman, said she doesn't want to leave. She said pays about \$850 per month for her 400-square-foot, studio apartment.

“Even with hotel guests coming in and out, it's quiet. It's been secure. I've been more than comfortable here. Nobody leaves,” she said.