

# Condo owners compensated 10 years after Wilma

By **LISA J. HURIASH**  
Staff writer

**TAMARAC** — It took a decade of fighting, but owners of the Southgate Gardens condo complex have finally been compensated for the damage and hardship they suffered after Hurricane Wilma pummeled their units on Oct. 24, 2005.

The 108-unit complex off Southgate Boulevard, east of University Drive, could be the last of Broward's communities to recover from the ferocious storm, which killed dozens, cut power to millions of homes and businesses and punched a sinkhole in Interstate 95.

Wilma tore the roofs off Southgate Gardens, which was built in 1987 as rental apartments and later converted to condos. Owners say the problem was exacerbated after a roofing company incorrectly laid tarps, causing holes in their wet ceilings and that led to more severe damage after a harrowing rainstorm the following week.

"Your eyeballs would pop out of your head," said Myles Sockin, of the moment he first saw the devastation.

Residents were asked to move out so repairs could be redone but they soon complained the construction company unnecessarily ripped out walls before they even started fixing the roof. They also said their belongings, including lighting fixtures, kitchen appliances, furniture and at least one child's bicycle, were thrown out by workers or stolen by vandals.

As the work dragged on, the condo board had to delay repairs because it ran out of money and couldn't agree how to proceed. Owners alleged millions of dollars had been spent on repairs but the companies and contractors hired to make the fixes eventually walked away.

Adding to their problems: some residents didn't have insurance for the contents inside their units, leaving them with no money for interior repairs.

Some desperate homeowners slept in their cars for a period, others moved back in to units that had no electricity because they had no place to go. Still others tried to live in units that had supposedly been fixed, only to leave in fear from the electrical pops and cackling. Others fled to move in with



STAFF FILE PHOTO

Guitree Basdeo checks a carpet in a bedroom for mold in her Southgate Gardens apartment in 2006.

friends, relatives, hotels.

"I was in a FEMA trailer temporarily. A lot of people lost a lot of money," said Sockin, who now lives in Boca Raton.

Work on removing the mold was delayed because some owners had sneaked back in. The contractor also complained because a resident living there illegally was running an extension cord from one building that had power to his own unit.

At one point, the contractor said it couldn't complete inside renovations until the buildings were brought up to code by building firewalls, and blamed City Hall

for delaying them.

The city manager's office vigorously denied being responsible for slowing down the project. They said the contractor hadn't submitted any plans and was moving so slowly it took six months to repair seven roofs.

The renovations took so long that by 2009, many owners stopped paying mortgages for units they couldn't live in, while paying rent elsewhere at the same time.

"It was like we were being tortured, it was dragged out for 10 years. People really, really suffered," said

Sockin.

He owned his two-bedroom condo for 27 years before Wilma hit. After the storm, it was destroyed by mold and water damage and he said the contractors broke his furniture and ruined a brand-new kitchen floor.

He lost his \$150,000 unit in 2006 when the board of directors foreclosed because he refused to pay his monthly \$234 homeowner's association fee.

"It's like I buy a Cadillac, you drive it, and I have to make the payments? I was very angry," he said.

It took until September, 2015, for dozens of residents who lost their homes "for an extraordinarily and unreasonable amount of time" to get a confidential settlement from the original contractors and former property managers.

"Everybody has moved on, you have to," Sockin said. "But it's something you never forget. It was a nightmare."

Former owner Holly Spears, who now lives in Coral Springs, is looking to try her hand at homeownership again.

Yet she said she can't shake off Wilma and what it did to her — three years of

mortgage payments at \$700 a month for a unit that was never repaired until she let it go into foreclosure. All that time, she was struggling to pay \$1,300 a month rent, the condo maintenance fee, and almost \$100 for storage so she could keep her pictures, Christmas decorations, computer, vacuum cleaner and books, which were the only items salvageable.

She said she wasn't earning enough money for all the expenses.

"It was hard to save, or catch up, to keep it going," said Spears, who shared the condo with her boyfriend and teenage daughter, starting in 2001.

She's looking for a house now, aware that hurricane season gets underway on June 1. It's daunting, she says, because "I know what damage can actually be done."

"Every time a hurricane is in close range I feel like, 'Is my ceiling going to cave in, is it going to rain inside my house again? Will I have a repeat of the devastation,'" Spear said. "It's definitely scary."

lhuriash@tribpub.com or 954-572-2008

## Man charged with theft in iPhone sale scheme

By **ERIKA PESANTES**  
Staff writer

Expecting to triple her money, an investor forked over about \$100,000 to a bogus businessman who instead defrauded her in Hallandale Beach, police say.

Aaron Stephen White, who lives in Texas, faces a grand theft charge in the September 2012 case. He posted \$10,000 bond and has been released from jail, records show.

According to a police report, White persuaded Amberleigh Clark to give him \$97,000 over the course of more than a year for the purchase of Apple iPhones. He tried to prove his iPhone distribution business in the Caribbean was legitimate by showing her a contract he had with someone else he was accused of duping, authorities said. White met Clark through a mutual friend and their agreements were verbal, police said.

When reached by phone, Clark declined to comment. Keith Seltzer, White's attorney, also declined to comment on the case.

Hallandale Beach Detective Christopher Grieco described White, 44, as a "professional con man" who "doesn't walk around looking like a poor guy."

He's not overly flashy, but has posted Facebook

photos of himself posing next to a Ferrari, the detective said.

According to an incident report, White also promised to make Clark an employee so she could obtain a work visa that would help her toward her U.S. citizenship.

To string her along, White said he could later use her profits to invest in a marijuana dispensary in Colorado, Grieco said.

Clark also allowed White to use her credit card for purchases related to the supposed business, police said. White racked up about \$12,000 in credit card charges for his personal use, the report said. It is unclear what he purchased.

When White approached Clark with the business proposal, he presented a company named PixelSofa. According to the company website, PixelSofa claims to be a mobile app developer that customizes apps for businesses. Its listed Broward number is no longer working.

The contract police say White used to persuade the woman to make the bogus investment stems from another 2012 case.

In that case, authorities said White sold \$581,000 worth of iPhones through his PixelSofa company to Adel Korkis. The 850 phones were never shipped to Korkis, who gave a

\$75,000 deposit, according to a Hallandale Beach police report.

According to detectives, White took Korkis' money to pay court-ordered restitution to a Fort Lauderdale aviation company that had bought bogus iPads from him. A police report said White had worked at an Apple store in Boca Raton, where in 2011 he met the aviation company's representatives and told them he'd give them a deal on iPads.

Korkis, of Pembroke Pines, said he met White through a mutual friend and believed him to be a "well-connected and professional businessman" who was an authorized Apple distributor.

"Usually I'm not easy to fall in this type of fraud. He was showing me how much he sells for Apple and what type of good connections he had with Apple," Korkis said. "All the stories, he even showed me pictures, emails from Apple, everything you can imagine the guy had prepared for it."

Court records show that White pleaded no contest in the case involving Korkis and was given five years' probation through March 2020 and ordered to pay restitution.

epesantes@tribpub.com, 954-356-4543 or Twitter @epesantes

## It's only water



MIKE STOCKER/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Undeterred beachgoers walk along the Broadwalk on Hollywood beach with umbrellas as they try to do dodge the rain on the Memorial Day weekend.

## TAMARAC

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The other events to celebrate the holiday is guest speaker retired U.S. Air Force Capt. Arnold Tolbert, a former pilot.

The city also will be honoring Vietnam veterans at the ceremony in recognition of the 50th anniversary of that war. Commemorative pins will be available for all Vietnam vets.

And the city will honor veterans who received Purple Hearts who were wounded or killed in action.

For information about the monument, call 954-597-3621. Residents



CARLINE JEAN/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Zachary Knudson, owner of The Glass Artist, installs one of eight glass monuments at Tamarac Veterans' Park.

must submit paperwork showing an honorable discharge, as well as proof of residency through a water or electric bill. There is no

fee to be part of the memorial.

lhuriash@tribpub.com or 954-572-2008

## Concert and movie series planned

By **EMILY MILLER**  
Staff writer

From Broadway tunes and rock 'n' roll favorites to minions and Jedis, the city of Boca Raton is setting out to keep music and movie lovers entertained with a free concert and movie series on Friday nights.

Summer in the City: Music and Movies Under the Stars will run June 3 through Aug. 19 at the Mizner Park Amphitheater in

downtown Boca. The series will feature tributes to David Bowie, Billy Joel, Bob Marley, Eagles and Led Zeppelin, and a performance by the Symphonia Boca Raton.

Also on the bill: showings of "Star Wars: The Force Awakens" and "Minions."

On nights with concerts, the event will start at 7:30 p.m. Movies are set to begin at 8 p.m. The FAU Summer Concert Band will play a

special Father's Day concert at 7 p.m. June 19, the only concert not on a Friday night.

A small selection of concert fare will be on sale at the venue, and chairs will be available to rent for \$5. Pets are not allowed at the amphitheater.

For more information about Summer in the City, visit myboca.us/pages/mizneramphi/, or call the city of Boca Raton at 561-393-7700.

men's room, it means you might be in North Carolina and a transgender woman is complying with the law.

I don't really get why some people are so worked up about which bathrooms transgender individuals use. Some groups are making an issue about sex predators exploiting the rules to venture into any restroom they want. Guess what? They can do that anyway. And predators who prey on the same sex are already in the bathroom they're supposed to use.

Anybody who behaves lewdly or commits an assault in a public bathroom or locker room already can be charged with

a crime, with no special gender laws required. And if school kids abuse transgender-friendly rules to improperly access bathrooms or locker rooms and harass other students, they should face punishment.

What about kids (or parents) who feel uncomfortable by the presence of a transgender student? Maybe it's time to build more solo restrooms and changing rooms in schools, for the sake of all sides.

Until then, keep your head down and expect a lot more noise about plumbing.

mmayo@tribpub.com or 954-356-4508

## TOW

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ment.

■ The county could force a tow company to reimburse a driver for excessive charges. And tow companies would have to provide, on a separate sheet of paper, a note telling customers they can complain to the county and providing the phone number.

The focus on towing began in 2011, after a mass-towing incident at Sawgrass Mills Mall in Sunrise. The reverberations continue.

On Black Friday shopping day that year, All County Towing removed more than 300 cars from lots around the mall. The ensuing uproar led Sunrise and then Broward County to pass strict towing laws.

Sunrise was watching when Black Friday came around last fall. The city suspended All County's permit on Nov. 28, after the police chief said it used predatory tactics in towing 94 cars from seven businesses around Sawgrass Mills Mall on the Thanksgiving/Black Friday shop-

## The newest law would ratchet up the rules even further.

ping weekend. The city followed up in January, revoking All County's permit for two years. All County filed a lawsuit, which is pending.

Depending on the outcome of the court case, All County could see its Broward license revoked, as well, under what is proposed.

Chris Casale, owner of All County Towing, said he hadn't analyzed the proposed county ordinance.

"I've looked at it briefly," he said, requesting that any questions be submitted to him in writing. Casale did not respond to questions submitted in writing.

At a county meeting Tuesday, attorney Gary Poliakoff for the Sunshine State Towing Association said he hoped to see some "tweaks." For one thing, he said companies could be asked to use a secondary method of credit card authorization — by telephone,

for example — if a machine is down, rather than being forced to release the car without payment.

Broward Commissioner Lois Wexler said the proposed law, pushed by Commissioner Mark Bogen, "takes it up to the next level" in "protecting the consumers."

Commissioner Beam Furr said he opposed allowing tow companies to levy a 2.5 percent credit card surcharge.

Commissioners will debate the details in June.

Towing rates are set by the county. Commissioners increased the rates last year. For a tow from private property, the allowed charge is \$120. After six hours in storage, a \$24 daily storage charge is added. If the owner takes 24 hours or more to arrive at the tow yard, a \$30 administrative fee can be added.

If you think you were overcharged or want to find out more, go to broward.org or call the county at 954-765-4400.

bwallman@tribpub.com or 954-356-4541. On Twitter @BrittanyWallman and @BrowardPolitics