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## SAVING HOME: FORMER MET BUYS NOTORIOUS COMPLEX

Mo Vaughn's housing company will take possession of Noble Drew Ali Plaza and its problems. > *By Nick Judd*

A major turning point in the life of an infamous property owned by a man named to the Village Voice's "10 Worst Landlords" list came in 2002 when residents of Noble Drew Ali Plaza started getting eviction notices. After their buildings had suffered years of neglect under "worst landlord" Abdur Rahman Farrakhan, and almost a decade of exploitation by previous landlord Linden Realty, tenants of the neglected complex in Brownsville, Brooklyn decided enough was enough. When the eviction notices came, members of the recently-formed tenants' association enlisted the help of the Legal Aid Society to fight them in court.

Now, four years later, it's their landlord who's getting the eviction notice.

Former Mets slugger Mo Vaughn and his business partner Eugene Schneur, co-owners of housing redevelopment corporation OMNI New York LLC, are set this week to finalize an approximately \$21 million contract for the 385-unit apartment complex. Approximately \$8 million of the price will be paid in cash and the remainder through financing such as low-interest soft loans.

The sale is the end result of four years of litigation by tenants, beginning with the 2002 suit that alleged Farrakhan's Noble Drew Ali Plaza Housing Corp. illegally evicted many of them en masse and attempted to evict even more. The housing court suit became a State Supreme Court suit, and from there went to appeal four times. As the various corporations controlling the housing corporation filed for bankruptcy – thus interrupting all litigation against them – the appeals process stalled. According to Legal Aid Society attorney Mimi Rosenberg, who represented the Noble Drew Ali Tenants Association in court, this week's final bankruptcy procedure accomplishes the tenants' goal of finding a new, responsible owner for the Plaza.

The contract for Noble Drew Ali Plaza will go before U.S. Bankruptcy Court Judge James M. Peck for final approval on Thursday, according to Schneur. OMNI has purchased and rehabilitated about a thousand units of distressed housing in the metropolitan area over the past two and a half years, including projects in the Bronx and East New York, he said.

"We see an opportunity to take one of the most troubled properties in New York City and turn it around," said Schneur, who considers it good business, not charity. "At the same time, are we making money doing this? Yes." More important to the low-income tenants, OMNI has agreed to uphold riders on the Plaza's deed requiring the owner to maintain at least 20 percent of its apartments as affordable to low- and very low-income families and to accept tenants making use of federal Section 8 housing subsidies. Schneur says OMNI is expecting to spend an additional \$23 million to rehabilitate the Plaza, beginning this spring. The complex needs it.

"The buildings are falling apart very rapidly," said Paulette Forbes, tenants' association president and a longtime Noble Drew resident. "We have no security, so the buildings are being vandalized. The drug traffic is out of control," Forbes said, explaining that the management company appointed by the bankruptcy court in May to handle day-to-day operations at the Plaza has only enough money to keep security guards in the five six-story buildings on weekdays. "The roof needs repairing. We have lines of tenant apartments from the sixth floor down to the first floor so that when it rains, it rains through all of those apartments," she said.

Such problems have been the norm for some time. In 2003, in a preliminary injunction to stop Farrakhan from evicting more tenants, a State Supreme Court justice wrote, "Elevators remained inoperative for years at a time, heat and hot and cold water were not provided for extended periods, and the apartments were deplorably maintained, having broken walls, appliances, plumbing and fixtures; water leaks and mold, and infestations of roaches and vermin."

The tenants' case is just the latest in a series of mismanagement allegations surrounding the complex. In 1983, the city's Department of Investigation released a report suggesting the Plaza's developers were misallocating rent money, but could not turn their allegations into prosecutions or arrests. Principals of Linden Realty, who owned Noble Drew Ali Plaza from 1989 to 1996, were indicted in 1998 for stealing federal money earmarked for the complex and spending it on everything from home mortgages to political contributions. The United States Department of Housing and Urban Development has been waiting for litigation to end to take Farrakhan himself to task for failing to account for approximately \$1.6 million in up-front rehabilitation funds for the Plaza he received with the deed of transfer in 1996.

Albion Liburd, who replaced Farrakhan in June as executive director of Noble Drew Ali's not-for-profit owner, Oceanhill Brownsville Tenants Association, said the allegations against Farrakhan were exaggerated. "If he'd have done everything that they've said, I'm sure HPD would have put him in jail by now," Liburd said. But he added, "I'm not saying that Oceanhill or Farrakhan did a wonderful job."

Farrakhan could not be reached for comment.

After years of disappointment and months of negotiations, Noble Drew Ali Plaza may finally break free of its dark past. "Everybody's just anxious," said Forbes. "Are we really going to have regular heat, regular hot water?" Every day the deal remains unclosed is another day the Plaza, managed now by court-appointed Wavecrest Management on a shoestring budget, goes without funding for much-needed security and major repairs. "You're praying, everybody's just praying," she said. "We really can't wait."

- [Nick Judd](#)