

Memo Saying Tenants 'Live Like Pigs' Brews Storm

By Mary Battiata Washington Post Staff Writer

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A memo from Alexandria's public housing director charging that some public housing tenants "live like pigs" has brought the wrath of seven of the city's prominent blacks, who are calling for the official's dismissal and accusing him of having a "plantation mentality."

The official, Housing and Redevelopment Authority Director Angus T. Olson, defended his record yesterday and called the charges an "unfortunate thing. Seven members of the black community have overreacted."

In a letter mailed to the city's citizen housing commission, the black leaders, including a retired City Council member

and the director and president of the local Urban League and the NAACP, have asked for Olson's dismissal and an investigation of his memo.

"I'm fed up with tenants who live like pigs and negligently damage their apartments, calling the Health Department to moan and groan about what poor landlords we are," the Olson memo reads.

The April 5 memo was apparently in response to a Health Department report citing code violations at public housing units.

"We are not only deeply concerned about the insensitivity for tenants expressed in the copy of this memorandum," the letter from the black leaders said, but also that "Alexandria's

public housing is returning to the 'plantation mentality' that existed in the early 1960s."

Northern Virginia Urban League Director George Lambert, one of those who signed the letter calling for Olson's dismissal, said yesterday that Olson owed the public housing tenants "at the very least, a public apology." He added that the black leaders sent the letter only after Olson had refused to meet with them to discuss the matter.

"Lambert said there were racial undertones to the thing," Olson said. "I think a dialogue like that really belongs in a public forum."

The city's housing commission emerged from a special

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closed meeting Tuesday night declaring full support for Olson, 35, and defending him as a "complete housing professional." The commission credited his management with keeping the city's public housing programs and its 3,044 units solvent in an era when many public housing authorities around the country have gone bankrupt.

Copies of the Olson memo, which was intended for an Olson aide, were distributed by a public housing tenant at a recent groundbreaking for a new public high-rise for the elderly. The tenant, Geneva Weeks, attached copies of the memo to a cover letter reading: "Does Mr. Olson really care and respect the residents living in public housing? Before you come to a conclusion, read his attached administrative directive to ARHA staff

Stapled to copies of the memo was a public health department investigator's report noting repairs that must be made to Weeks' two-bedroom public housing unit, including replacement of missing window screens, vent covers and repair of a hole in the wall.

Weeks' lawyer, John Rosenthal, said yesterday that Weeks believes Olson was referring to her in his memo. "There's no question in her mind that he was," Rosenthal said. Olson said he was referring to no specific tenant. He also said he has no idea how the memo was removed from his office.

"I don't know who got the memo or distributed it," Lambert said. "Who got what where is not important. The fact that Mr. Olson referred to any tenant as a 'pig' is inexcusable. We're talking about human beings here. That the director would refer to tenants in an informal memo, formal memo or whatever in that way, really shows a lack of integrity."

Alexandria's housing authority operates independently of the City Council, though its executive director is chosen by a council-appointed citizens board. Under Olson's direction during recent years the authority has been engaged in a generally successful effort to sell its older projects and use the profits for construction and renovation of newer units.