

# The Columbus Dispatch

## CITY PAINTS ARTS BUILDING INTO A CORNER

### *Officials say it's unsafe; owner to fight evictions*

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NEWS 06C

**Illustration:** Photo, MAP

**By Doug Caruso**  
*Dispatch City Hall Reporter*

Rick Mann is caught in a Catch22.

To fix the code violations that Columbus has identified at the *Milo* Arts building, where Mann rents studio and apartment space to 34 artists, he needs city approval for his architect's plans.

But while he waits for that approval, city attorneys are seeking to have his tenants evicted, saying the building is a fire hazard.

The case is due back in court on Feb. 3 before Franklin County Environmental Judge Richard C. Pfeiffer.

In October, when the city asked Pfeiffer to evict the artists from the building at 617 E. 3rd Ave., the judge said they could remain as long as Mann paid for a fire patrol of the building 24 hours a day and began work toward installing fire alarms, smoke detectors and fire walls.

Mann said he's done everything the judge asked. He's commissioned plans for alarms, sprinklers and fire walls; he's paid nearly \$50,000 for a 24-hour patrol -- first firefighters, then security guards -- and he's installed new fire doors and fixed other problems the city identified last fall.

"All of a sudden when we're finishing the project, they want to move everyone out," Mann said. "It doesn't seem very realistic to approach it that way."

Patsy Thomas, the assistant city attorney who is prosecuting Mann, said the issue still is one of safety. Mann never received a city occupancy permit, she said, and city officials didn't know until September that people lived in the building.

The building still lacks fire alarms, fire walls and other safety features required by building codes, she said. Mann can have as much time as he needs to fix the problems, she said -- if no one occupies the building while he does that.

That's what she'll argue before Pfeiffer on Feb. 3.

"Because of the threat to individuals' lives, they need to be out of the building," Thomas said. "If it was your son or daughter working in the building and there was a fire, how much time would you give them?"

Still, fire inspection records from the 1990s show few problems with the building. Mann and his attorney, Bill Loveland, question why the city is suddenly seeking to kick out artists who have lived and worked there since 1989.

They say they'll be able to prove that city building officials knew the building was occupied.

Bill Loveland, Mann's attorney, said he suspects the city has some plan for the *Milo* Arts site -- perhaps as a community center for the *Milo* Grogan neighborhood.

"I have to suspect there's more and that there are other circumstances that will come out in the trial," Loveland said. "There have been statements made at *Milo* Grogan meetings that this would make a wonderful community recreation center. But we haven't been able to find anyone in the city who says that is the case."

Wayne Roberts, Columbus director of recreation and parks, said his department has no plans for the *Milo* building and couldn't afford it anyway. The department is trying to buy land adjacent to *Milo* Grogan's current recreation center at 2nd and St. Clair avenues to enlarge that center, he said.

"We've been working for three years on that expansion," Roberts said.

Meanwhile, artists such as Aaron Schroeder, who creates moving metal sculptures for clients that have included the Atlanta airport and local businesses, are caught in the middle.

Schroeder, who rents the gym in the 107-year-old former elementary school as a studio, takes a philosophical view of the city's actions.

"It's beyond my power and control," he said this week. "I'm hoping that it all works out and that I'm not further delayed and prohibited from getting my work done."

In October, he was left without a studio for several days while immediate hazards in the gym were corrected.

He said Mann has helped him since he began renting space at *Milo* Arts in 1992, sometimes accepting late rent payments when Schroeder was short on cash.

"Rick Mann is a saint in my book," Schroeder said, "because he really understands the circumstances I'm in."

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**Caption:** (1) Tom Dodge / Dispatch

Thoma Swanson, a Dominican nun who has lived in the *Milo* Arts building for 1 1/2 years, made the stained-glass picture in the background.

(2) Map

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