

East Pittsburgh residents displaced by Route 30 landslide return home

KATE GIAMMARISE

Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

kgiammarise@post-gazette.com

OCT 19, 2018

5:00 AM

In the early morning hours of April 7, Richard Clanagan awoke to a knock at the door of his apartment on Electric Avenue in East Pittsburgh.

A firefighter was at his door, telling him he had to leave.

When he asked why, he was told, "The hill's coming down."

Thinking he would be all right in his second-floor apartment, he shut the door and went back to bed.

Though he didn't know it at the time, [three lanes of Route 30 had fallen](#) about 30 feet down the hillside behind his home, setting off a landslide that would close the road for months and damage a house and two of the five buildings of the Electric Avenue Apartments so severely that they had to be torn down.

About an hour later, a police officer knocked at door, and again ordered him to leave.

"I said, 'What for?'" Mr. Clanagan recounted. "He said, 'Man, the hill just knocked the building down next door.'" Mr. Clanagan, who is 75, stepped into his small second-story balcony and saw the wreckage of a nearby building in the same apartment complex.

He could see into the apartments through the collapsed walls, and smelled a heavy smell of natural gas.

"I said, 'Well, maybe I better go.'"

Mr. Clanagan — and many of his neighbors — spent the next six months living in a series of Monroeville hotels. He returned to his apartment last week; many of his neighbors at the Electric Avenue Apartments have also recently returned after months away.

They are now adjusting to being back home, after what was a traumatic and life-altering event.

“Emotionally, for me it was really draining. I started to get, like, depressed and whatnot,” Mr. Clanagan said. “People would say, ‘Boy, you're living in a hotel, you're lucky.’ No, I'm not lucky. That's not home.”

Since returning home, other residents have struggled with missing belongings, problems with items that had grown moldy or mildewed in the months they were gone, and complex feelings about living so near to the site of a landslide.

Resident Timothy Barker, 68, returned home Monday to find all of his belongings gone.

“They took all my personal items,” he said. “I don't know who is going to be responsible for this.”

Resident Lonita Montgomery, 71, hasn't completely moved back in, but she was in her apartment Thursday cleaning. She has been staying with her daughter in Wilkins since her early morning evacuation from the apartments back in April.

“It's something I would not recommend for anyone, going through this,” she said. The stress has been difficult for residents, she said.

She said she tries not to think too much about the retaining wall and hillside behind the apartments, though she said it is often on her mind.

“I'm just taking it one day at a time,” she said.

According to PennDOT officials, 19 tenants have returned to the East Pittsburgh apartments. Some others have decided to relocate elsewhere. One resident remains without a relocation plan.

“We are attempting to work with their attorney on a relocation plan,” a PennDOT spokesman said. Additionally, the displaced homeowners were

“made an offer and their relocation plan is active,” according to the agency.

No litigation has been filed in the matter, but Pittsburgh law firm Robert Peirce & Associates is representing a number of the tenants.

On Thursday, residents also said they were grateful for the assistance of the American Red Cross, Allegheny County Department of Human Services and the nearby Presentation of Christ Greek Orthodox Church, which is a short distance from the apartments on Electric Avenue, and gave residents gift cards to assist them.

“We consider it a blessing to be able to help our neighbors,” said parish priest, the Rev. Dean Kokanos.

“They took very good care of us,” said Mr. Clanagan.

Ms. Montgomery also said she appreciated Gov. Tom Wolf speaking to the residents and assuring them they would be able to return.

“He was very nice...He spoke and he listened to whatever you had to say,” she said.

Ms. Montgomery also said she counts herself lucky that she did not lose everything, as some residents did.

“The blessing is that no one was hurt or died,” she said, gesturing around her. “These are just material things.”

Ed Blazina contributed. Kate Giammarise: kgiammarise@post-gazette.com or 412-263-3909.