

OUC may cut water and power to Orlando's \$700M Veranda Park town center

Developer Kevin Azzouz is behind on power bills, OUC says

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WINDERMERE - Starting today, the lights could literally go out at **Veranda Park**.

While developer **Kevin Azzouz** battles foreclosures and bankruptcies to salvage his \$700 million west Orlando town center, the end could come through a power switch and a water spigot.

The Orlando Utilities Commission is scheduled to begin shutting off the electricity and water today throughout Veranda Park, a move that could force out hundreds of residents and workers and dozens of business owners.

"This is just baffling; how could this happen?" said resident Tonya Jill Bates, who estimated that more than 100 people are renting condos in the 157-unit building at South Hiwassee Road and Lake Debra Drive.

"We pay our bills, we pay our rent. Where did all that money go?" said Bates, a banker, who pays about \$1,200 a month in rent.

Neither Azzouz nor his representatives returned phone calls or e-mails seeking comment.

Azzouz and his various Veranda Park business entities owe more than \$378,000, and some of the accounts have been in arrears for nine months, according to OUC records.

OUC has sent out notices to residents and businesses that it will shut off services in staggered succession, ending July 21.

A fifth building -- the four-story, incomplete office-condo in the project's center that owes OUC more than \$42,200 -- is shielded for now by an ongoing bankruptcy case.

Samir Burshan, head of the Building 1000 business owners association, said they are negotiating with OUC directly on the \$6,400 tab for the offices at Hiwassee Road and Westpointe Boulevard.

The tide of red ink contrasts with the early days of the project when Azzouz, who made his money from the sale of a Silicon Valley computer firm, spent lavishly.

The developer decorated a now-defunct coffee shop with a \$30,000 Turkish stone fireplace, leather chairs and plasma TVs.

Since 2003, Azzouz has built five buildings in Veranda Park, with artwork and chiseled marble throughout. His swing-for-the-fences style is displayed at the center's entrance. Atop an imported marble fountain is a replica of the Four Horses of Saint Mark's Basilica in **Venice**. The fountain hasn't worked in months.

Plans are unclear for other amenities, including Italian-style, hand-carved gondolas for rides on Lake Debra, and six more buildings, including a four-star hotel, a multiplex movie theater, more offices, shops and an outdoor amphitheater.

The Rev. Bill Barnes, pastor of St. Luke's United Methodist Church in southwest Orange County, is worried about his daughter Meredith, who rents a condo in Veranda.

"She's in a Catch-22 scenario," he said. "If she leaves, does that mean she's breaking the lease and will lose all of her deposit money? Or if she stays to see how this plays out, does that mean she'll be moving out in the dark?"

Meredith Barnes, an interior designer, Tonya Bates and some of the other 100 residents pay their utility bills directly to OUC, so they won't lose power in their units. But if the condo's bill doesn't get paid, their building might not have working elevators, sprinklers, fire and security alarms or lights in the hallways.

If that happens, Bates wondered whether the city would let the residents stay.

Orlando's code-enforcement department Director Mike Rhodes said no.

"We're sympathetic to their plight, but it's a safety issue," Rhodes said.

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