

Soaking in the Element

Flooding from a water line break affects the first 27 floors of 35-story apartment tower. Hundreds of residents are displaced.

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TAMPA — Tracy Story and her fiance woke up at 3:30 a.m. Friday to find water pouring from their vents and light fixtures. They opened the front door of their apartment to find it was “literally raining in the hallways.”

Cellphone videos show a stream flowing from above the microwave and stove as an alarm and a recorded evacuation message sound. The flow continued for two hours, flooding the floor with 2 to 3 inches of water.

“Our apartment was completely covered,” Story said.

So were scores of others.

Story lives high up on the 25th floor of downtown Tampa’s iconic Element apartment tower, where all 500 residents were evacuated Friday after a municipal water line broke around 3:30 a.m. There were two breaks, Tampa Fire Rescue said, one on the 27th floor of the 35-story building.

The cascading water also trapped a security guard in an elevator until he could be released by Fire Rescue. A firefighter was hurt during evacuation efforts but was expected to return to duty. No other injuries were reported.

The city Fire Marshal’s Office is investigating what went wrong, but the problem occurred in an area controlled by the Element and not the city Water Department, city officials said.

Three residents or neighbors of the building told the Tampa Bay Times that it has chronic problems with water leaks. In December, Element shut off water on several floors for about a week, temporarily relocating people to hotels, residents said. It was not immediately clear whether the earlier problems were related to Friday’s leak.

In a statement, the building’s owner, Northland Investment Corp. of Newton, Mass., said the company did not know when people would be allowed back into the Element. All the building’s residents were evacuated.

“Our property team is currently working with Tampa Fire and Rescue to assess building safety and security so that all necessary repairs are made after this morning’s water main break,” the company said. “The safety of our residents is paramount, and we will follow the guidance of public safety officials regarding access to the building.”

Northland said there was a pipe burst at Element on Jan. 3, but no residents were put up in a hotel.

Firefighters called to the scene Friday inspected each floor and found that the cause of the flooding was a break in the main municipal water supply line inside the building. Portions of the line “breached” on both the 12th and 27th floors, Fire Rescue said.

Every floor from the 27th down showed some impact from the flooding. The building has 395 units.

Building managers sent an email saying they would accommodate everyone who needed lodging, according to Story, beginning with those on the floors described as suffering the heaviest damage — the 10th, 11th, 12th and 27th. Story opted not to wait and is paying for her own hotel room.

Power to the building had been secured Friday afternoon, and a generator was being used to supply spot power, said Jason Penny, Fire Rescue spokesman. Repairs were needed to the sprinkler and fire alarm systems but shouldn’t delay a return to the building, Penny said, because Fire Rescue can station a fire engine or observers outside.

At 460 feet, the Element is one of Tampa’s tallest buildings with a distinctive postmodern style and a sleek glassy exterior. It changed the downtown skyline when it opened in 2009, two years after the towering SkyPoint residential tower a couple of blocks away. Northland purchased the Element in 2017.

Just before noon, dozens of residents were huddled in Element’s lobby — hot, humid and crowded — waiting for permission to retrieve pets and medicine. Those living above the 27th floor were allowed to return for essential items, but others were forced to wait.

A building representative told them the electricity would soon be shut off and no one would be allowed to return to their units. The reason, the representative said: Some residents had re-entered flooded floors, risking electrical shock.

Story and her fiance decided to risk a trip back up to get their cat.

At noon, resident Ashlyn Pietraniec was still waiting to retrieve her cat, Harvey. She left Harvey behind when she evacuated because she didn’t realize how long she’d be gone, she said.

Beautify the Beast pet grooming shop, near the Element at 809 N Tampa St., took in evacuated pets if their owners couldn’t bring them along immediately.

Resident Alex Robinett said that water leaks at the Element have been so severe and persistent, he decided after a year living there to move out. Robinette was getting ready to leave Friday when he heard the evacuation alarms.

“I’m tired of this s--t,” he said.

Pietraniec has lived in the building since October, and her unit has flooded twice, she said. The first time, black water poured in through the garbage

disposal, coating the hardwood floor and seeping under her carpet, she said.

After that, Pietraniec tried to change units or break her lease but found “there wasn’t much anybody could do.”

Element sent in a cleaning crew, she said.

“It took about a week to fan it out,” Pietraniec said. “And that’s why I’m worried this is gonna take a while for us to get back in.”

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Servicemen carry a pipe into the Element apartment tower, hours after all 500 residents were evacuated Friday.



Lucia Hardin, a Beautify the Beast pet grooming shop employee, carries the dog Lucy to her owners, residents of Element, hours after a main water line burst in the Tampa tower Friday. The shop offered to shelter evacuated pets. Photos by Ivy Ceballo | Times

Residents wait inside the Element lobby. The building's owner, Northland Investment Corp., did not know when people would be allowed back in their apartments. *Photos by Ivy Ceballo | Times*

An air blower dries a hallway on the first floor of Element, one of Tampa's tallest buildings.

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