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Thursday, August 21, 2014

E. Eighth St. tenants are suing Croman over 'harassment'

August 21, 2014 | Filed under: News | Posted by: The Villager



BY ZACH WILLIAMS | An ivy-covered building on E. Eighth St. is the latest site of legal clashes between East Village tenants and landlord Steven Croman.

Two new lawsuits allege that Croman uses building repairs and renovations as a means of inducing rent-regulated tenants to vacate 309 E. Eighth St.

A Croman representative "categorically denied" that charge, as well as other accusations of building neglect and the harassment of tenants.

The parties will meet in Housing Court on Aug. 26 after negotiations broke down earlier in the summer. The second case has yet to be scheduled for a hearing in State Supreme Court, according to records.

The two suits aim to compel Croman to make needed repairs before resuming construction, as well as address outstanding building violations and end what tenants, local politicians and housing activists say is an ongoing effort to dislodge the tenants.

Since buying the building in 2012, Croman has renovated vacant apartments in it to capitalize on the red-hot Manhattan real estate market. However, tenants allege that the construction work has filled their apartments with dust in recent months, led to multiple ceiling collapses and even drenched one apartment in raw sewage, among other grievances.

"There has to be a happy medium between [longtime tenants] and what they are trying to make it into now," said tenant Robert Pinter, who has lived in the building for 32 years.

In interviews with The Villager, residents of 309 E. Eighth St. — one of about 150 Croman-owned properties in Manhattan — echoed complaints from tenants of his building at 346 E. 18th St., which

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was the subject of a recent Villager article. The relentless manner with which building management pursues renovations indicates more nefarious goals, tenants say.

"My ceiling caved in four times, multiple leaks," said tenant James Peterson. "They take their sweet time fixing everything, even though they have three or four construction crews running around the building fixing up the new apartments."

He said that buyout offers of as low as \$10,000 are being offered to the beleaguered tenants to get them to vacate their units.

Peterson and fellow tenant Shawn Dahl are the plaintiffs in the case before the State Supreme Court.

In November 2013, Dahl returned home only to find that an incident two days before had allowed raw sewage to seep into her apartment through the ceiling and plumbing fixtures.

"They knew what they had done and no one contacted me," she said.

She added that building management did address the issue once she complained.

"I felt bad, [management] sent a woman to clean all the sewage" with no gloves, a rag and some cleaner, Dahl said.

About a week later, a well-known Croman employee contacted Dahl with a buyout offer. But this was not the first time that Anthony Falconite visited her. The ex-police officer is well known among Croman tenants for approaching them with buyout offers while also investigating them in order to purportedly gather evidence of tenants abusing rent regulation by actually living elsewhere.

State Attorney General Eric Schneiderman slapped the Croman goon with a cease-and-desist order on July 22, barring him from continuing such activities.

In recent months, tenants have enjoyed additional help in their battles against Croman. The Cooper Square Committee and Good Old Lower East Side (GOLES) have advised tenants, while the Urban Justice Center provides legal firepower.

Brandon Kielbasa, lead organizer for the Cooper Square Committee, said the lawsuit in Housing Court stemmed from a sense of powerlessness among the E. Eighth St. tenants after an effort at reconciling with the landlord broke down in recent months, similar to efforts on E. 18th St.

"We've tried every other means of negotiating with them for repairs that needed to be done," said Kielbasa.

At a March 31 meeting, also attended by Kielbasa, tenants submitted to building management a list of suggested construction protocols. The requested measures included 24-hour notice before utility shutdowns, the installation of industrial air filters, vermin mitigation, replacement of the front door and a rent abatement.

"They said they were open to all of it, and then we didn't hear back from them until June 24, when all the new construction was beginning," Pinter said.

He added that construction dust may have played a role in his recent asthma diagnosis, an ailment he never experienced before.

A representative of Croman's 9300 Realty company had a different view on the situation. Croman has improved the building and removed 120 violations issued to the property's prior owner by the city's Department of Housing Preservation and Development, according to the representative's statement. Electrical and intercom systems have been upgraded, plus lighting and stairways have been repaired, according to 9300 Realty.

"The renovations to the building were permitted by the city and completed by licensed professionals," reads the statement. "The tenants behind the recent suit have a long history of litigation with the prior landlord, and we will vigorously defend ourselves against what we consider to be unfounded accusations by these individuals."

Building management addressed the tenant-suggested protocols and has exceeded its legal obligation in agreeing to a "majority of their requests," 9300 Realty added in a separate statement.

The new legal efforts arose as an investigation by Attorney General Schneiderman continues probing Croman's business practices. Investigators have gathered evidence from 309 E. Eighth St. as part of the fact-finding process, The Villager has learned.

Croman, meanwhile, also remains the target of local politicians, who praised Schneiderman last month for joining the fight against the landlord. State Senator Brad Hoylman told The Villager that Croman, in fact, ranks as the top landlord of concern in his district, which has, in part, inspired a new push to pass a bill, long stalled within committee, that would tighten oversight over New York City landlords.

"It's ironic that the reason places like the East Village are attractive to developers is because of the community created by these tenants who have lived there for decades," Hoylman said. "And now they are being faced by harassment and eviction in many cases."



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