

EXPRESS

Tenant Harassment Takes Center Stage

Added by paul on March 8, 2017.

Saved under City Hall, Politics, Real Estate

Tags: "construction as harassment", Ben Kallos, Brandon Kielbasa, Cooper Square Committee, Corey Johnson, Dan Garodnick, Helen Rosenthal, Jumaane Williams, Mark Levine, Melissa Mark-Viverito, Stand for Tenant Safety, tenants' rights

BY JOAQUIN COTLER | More than 100 people — tenants, representatives of community and legal advocacy organizations, and elected officials — rallied on City Hall's steps on the morning of February 23 calling on the City Council to pass a package of bills intended to curb what is often referred to "construction-as-harassment" on the part of landlords.

Their chants could not have been more clear: "What do we want? Our bills passed! When do we want it? Now!"

Tenant groups from around the city assembled to voice their support for the Stand for Tenant Safety — or STS — bills, a collection of 12 measures aimed at helping tenants protect themselves against bad-acting landlords. Seven of the 12 bills have been already come before the Council's Housing and Buildings Committee, but they have not yet been brought to the floor to receive an up or down vote by the full Council.

"Each year, hundreds and hundreds of residents come to my office to seek help in the face of harassment from their landlords, often in the form of illegal or unscrupulous construction work," said Upper West Side Councilmember Helen Rosenthal, who is one of 11 councilmembers who are sponsoring one or more of the bills in the package of reforms. "We need more tools to help them. We need a Department of Buildings that works for tenants, not just for owners and contractors. The reforms in the Stand for Tenant Safety legislation would be an important step toward re-centering the agency's priorities to put residents' safety first and prevent the harassment that too often goes undetected. It is critical that we pass these bills."

Rosenthal's bill, Intro. 944, would require on-site building permits to identify the occupancy status of a building undergoing construction to prevent landlords from falsely claiming the structure is empty so they can expedite the permitting process and would also penalize those who provide such false information. Rosenthal, who emphasized she was "proud to stand with this citywide coalition and with my citywide coalition of councilmembers, is co-sponsoring that measure with her West Side colleague Corey Johnson.

Affordable housing advocates and many tenants argue that landlords often employ dangerous construction work as a means of harassing rent-regulated tenants to force them to move.



Councilmembers Helen Rosenthal and Margaret Chin, joined by other elected officials and tenants' advocates, speak at a February 23 rally for the Stand for Tenant Safety package of reform bills currently working their way through the Council. |

JOAQUIN COTLER

“Too often, tenants in rent-regulated apartments are being forced out of their homes to escape construction harassment,” said Jane Li, an attorney with the Community Development Project of the Urban Justice Center. “New York City residents are put at risk and lose their homes so landlords can reap bigger profits.”

In her State of the City speech one week prior to the February 23 rally, Council Speaker Melissa Mark-Viverito addressed the issue head-on.

“Tenant harassment is far too rampant — but because it can be hard to prove in court, far too often it goes unchecked. Even when a tenant does beat the odds and win, they typically get nothing. We’re going to change that. Going forward, the Council will pass legislation so that when a landlord threatens a tenant, the burden will be on the landlord to prove it wasn’t harassment.”

She continued by saying that the City Council “will soon take a close look at how some landlords — unscrupulous landlords — may use construction work to push tenants out from their homes.”

According to Brandon Kielbasa, a community organizer for Cooper Square Committee in the East Village, having the Council speaker’s support is very important. Even so, he feels the process is being held up unnecessarily.

“Every week that we go without these Stand for Tenant Safety bills as laws, more tenants are harassed and more essential, affordable rent-regulated housing is lost,” Kielbasa stressed. “We need these laws yesterday. Our communities are being torn apart by construction-as-harassment.”

Councilmember Margaret Chin, who represents portions of Lower Manhattan, lamented that only seven of the dozen bills have even gotten a hearing.

“For the other five that haven’t had a hearing yet, we need to continue to push,” Chin told the crowd. “There are a lot of bills on the agenda for the Housing Committee, but that’s why we need everyone to work with us to ask our colleagues to move it quickly.”

Chin is a co-sponsor, with Brooklyn’s Carlos Menchaca, of Intro. 918, which would strengthen restrictions on construction and ratchet up building inspection.

Menchaca condemned “disruptive rehabilitation of vacant apartments” and other strategies some landlords use to intimidate tenants.

“We need to do whatever we can to help end fear in our country,” Menchaca said. “Passage of these bills will go a long way toward doing that.”

His 38th Council District includes several neighborhoods in central and southwest Brooklyn, including part of Gowanus, that are currently seeing widespread construction.

“The need for passage of these bills in our community is crystal clear,” said Dave Powell, a community organizer from the Fifth Avenue Committee in Park Slope, just east of Gowanus.

Idelys Savinon, a tenant at 342 Bergen Street in Gowanus, said she has experienced harassment since a new landlord recently took over her building.

“All my neighbors got forced out,” she said. “Now there’s construction, the apartment downstairs has no walls, and my hallway is a disaster.” She said despite it being winter, she hasn’t had heat and hot water for a month and a half. “I would like a nice hot shower. You know... basic living conditions. I’m taking them to court myself Monday, because they think they’re above the law — which they’re not.”

“We’ve been to these hearings and events with tenants from 342 Bergen Street, and we’ve done the same with tenants from dozens of other buildings,” Powell said. “Today’s event was really a call to the City Council and particularly the chairperson of the Housing and Buildings Committee, Councilman Jumaane Williams, and Speaker Melissa Mark-Viverito to show them that there is an urgent need to pass these bills now.”

Kielbasa and the other organizers urged Williams to schedule hearings for the remaining five bills in April, in hopes of bringing the full Stand for Tenant Safety legislative package to a vote this spring.

Several days after the rally, Kielbasa pointed to a tenant evacuation on the Lower East Side’s Stanton Street as an example of what can happen if the City Council continues to wait. There, on February 25, the Department of Buildings issued a vacate order for the building’s second floor as the crumbling ceiling began to give way. The building is owned by landlord Steve Croman, who has 20 felony charges pending against him, with the Stanton Street building cited with numerous violations that remain unaddressed, despite its tenants having gone to court repeatedly.

“Right now DOB issues lots of violations and they turn into fines,” Kielbasa said. “The city doesn’t force people to pay them. The passing of these laws couldn’t be any more urgent. We need to put an end to this type of illegal harassment.”