

East Side standoff Tenants fight new owner's eviction plan

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Erinmaura Condon and her dogs — Inch Worm and French Fry — are tenants at 12 E. 72nd St., where tenants say new owner is trying to force them out by doing disruptive construction work and allowing the building to deteriorate. When Steven Croman bought a six-story townhouse steps from Central Park on the upper East Side in 2002, he decided it would make the perfect home for his extended family.

All he needed to do before moving in with his wife, two young children and sister-in-law's family of four was empty the building's 23 rent-stabilized apartments, 18 of which were occupied.

It's a move that was technically within his rights, but one that the tenants of 12 E. 72nd St. say has made their lives a living hell.

"Essentially, he's managed to turn the building into a tenement," said Jack Nelson, who has lived in the converted townhouse off Madison Avenue for 20 years.

Last month, three tenants won a reprieve from a Manhattan Housing Court judge, who ruled that Croman could not evict because he had failed to give sufficient notice.

"This decision does not in any way change his plans," said Croman's lawyer, Todd Rose. "He is not going to be giving leases to the tenants. He is not conceding that they have the right to stay."

Realtors say the E. 72nd St. building, bought for \$5.5 million in 2002, could be worth three or more times as much today if converted to a single-family home.

Under current law, because Croman's plan calls for the building to become a family residence, he can evict tenants when their leases expire.

The only exceptions are residents age 62 or older. For them, Croman must provide equivalent or better rent-stabilized housing in the same neighborhood.

But many residents say they doubt Croman will ever live in the building. They suspect he will simply sell the property for a hefty profit.

"Economically, it's not feasible," said Robert Leighton, a tenant for over 30 years. "Nobody in his right mind would turn down an \$11 million profit."

Eight tenants have accepted buyout offers. Leighton and several of the 10 remaining residents say they turned down the last offer tendered, which was \$50,000.

Those holdouts say Croman has harassed them and tried to force them out with disruptive construction and allowing the building to deteriorate.

Their complaints: fire damage festered untouched for months, an exterior hand railing used by an 87-year-old tenant was removed; basement access to the garbage and laundry room was blocked and construction on new facility was halted and declared illegal by the city.

Also, the building was cited for rodent infestation. "I have caught 18 mice by now," said Karolina Hagman, a tenant for the last five years.

According to city records, the 61 buildings owned by Croman Real Estate have a total of 532 violations.

Croman's lawyer disputes the harassment claims, and said the owner will appeal the most recent court ruling.

"The law allows him to do this, provided he has the good faith to live there," Rose said. "He has signed a contract to sell his co-op with a broker. He plans on living there."

After meeting with some Croman tenants, Assemblyman Jonathan Bing (D-Manhattan) of the housing committee co-sponsored a bill that would restrict a landlord's ability to reclaim a building for personal use.

The bill, which was referred to the committee Feb. 4, limits owners to taking only one apartment for themselves and bars them from evicting a tenant who has lived in a building for more than 20 years.

"We feel that the [Croman] tenants have brought legitimate concerns that the landlord is not negotiating in good faith," Bing said.

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