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Pass Anti-Harassment Bills Posthaste, Activists Urge

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Margaret Chin, front row right, and Helen Rosenthal, to her left, were among the councilmembers at a City Hall rally last week calling for speedy passage of the STS package of anti-harassment bills. At left is Rolando Guzmán of Brooklyn's St. Nick's Alliance. Photo by Joaquin Cotler.

BY JOAQUIN COTLER |

On the morning of Thurs., Feb. 23, more than 100 people rallied on City Hall's steps calling for the City Council to pass a package of bills intended to curb "construction-as-harassment."

Their chants couldn't have been clearer: "What do we want? Our bills passed! When do we want it? Now!"

Tenant groups from around the city assembled to vocalize their support for the Stand for Tenant Safety (STS) bills, a collection of 12 regulations designed to help tenants protect themselves against "bad-acting" landlords. But while seven of the bills have already come before the Housing Committee, the City Council hasn't brought them to the full floor of the Council for a vote.

"For the other five that haven't had a hearing yet, we need to continue to push," Councilmember Margaret 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, who represents Lower Manhattan, is among the 11 councilmembers currently sponsoring tenant-safety bills. She's a co-sponsor of Intro 918, which, if passed, would strengthen restrictions on construction and ratchet up building inspection. The bill's other sponsor is

Brooklyn's Carlos Menchaca. Speaking at the rally, he condemned the "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. "It's particularly urgent if we're considering the rezoning of the Gowanus neighborhood. A lot of the displacement came right after the 2003 rezoning. We're losing so much of our community. There's an urgency and a fury to the landlords' harassment, and we can't wait literally another year."

Idelys Savinon, a tenant at 342 Bergen St. in Gowanus, said she has experienced harassment since a new landlord, Inc. Realty, 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 or 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, Councilmember Jumaane Williams, and Speaker Melissa Mark-Viverito to show them that there is an urgent need to pass these bills now."

In her State of the City speech just a few days before, 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," she said. "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."

Kielbasa and the other organizers urged Councilmember 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. He points to the highly publicized case of 159 Stanton St. on the Lower East Side as an example of what can happen if the City Council continues to wait.

On Sat., Feb. 25, the Department of Buildings (DOB) issued a vacate order for the second floor of the building, owned by notorious landlord Steve Croman, as the crumbling ceiling was beginning to give way. Croman currently already has 20 felony charges pending against him, and the building's walls are wallpapered with violation notices that remain unaddressed.

Current residents of 159 Stanton St. have been in and out of court, with little to show for it. However, the STS bills would make it so landlords like Croman would have to cough up their outstanding fines — or risk losing their buildings.

"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."

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