

## Near ceiling collapse forces Croman tenants to vacate on Stanton St.

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By The Villager



Above and below, photos of the ceiling at 159 Stanton St, that was deemed “dislodged and in danger of collapse” by the Department of Buildings, leading to an emergency vacate order.

**BY DENNIS LYNCH |** The Department of Buildings ordered second-floor residents at Steve Croman’s 159 Stanton St. to immediately vacate their apartments after a ceiling partially collapsed Saturday. The partial-vacate order came just two days after a New York City Housing Court judge ordered the notorious landlord to replace fireproofing on the building’s third floor — work that appears to have caused the partial collapse.

The incident doesn’t look good for Croman, who is facing 20 felony charges and civil charges that state Attorney General Eric Schneiderman brought against him over the summer for fraud and for aggressively pushing tenants out of rent-stabilized apartments in his buildings, among other alleged criminal activity related to his real estate business.

D.O.B. said the 159 Stanton ceiling was “dislodged and in danger of collapse,” and that the condition caused by “construction activity” in vacant apartments above. Tenants in two second-floor apartments had to leave, including a father and his 12-year-old son. Croman’s company, 9300 Realty, will have to repair the damages before tenants can move back into their apartments.

One of those residents forced to vacate showed The Villager around the apartment they hastily left Saturday morning. She called D.O.B. for an inspection last week after noticing plaster falling from her ceiling.

There was visible erosion along the ceiling near a water pipe and the ceiling sagged considerably along one wall in one tenant’s apartment. The tenant had to cover all their belongings with plastic sheets and shack up with a friend.

Part of the living-room ceiling previously collapsed on the tenant last summer. That incident, compounded with other safety violations and Croman's alleged strong-arm tactics, prompted tenants to band together to bring a Housing Court suit against him in



December. They've formed the 159 Stanton St. Tenants Association to take on the issues together. The court action sought corrections to numerous issues at 159 Stanton St., but problems continue, according to the tenant, who wished to go unnamed.

"I was in shock this morning, I was really sort of stunned, and we were prepared — the whole reason we have this [Housing Court] action is because we thought something like this would happen," she said. "When my ceiling fell on me, I wanted to know what I can do to prevent this from happening again."

The lawyer handling the Housing Court case on behalf of the 159 Stanton Street Tenants Association also filed a separate court action seeking to correct the collapsing ceiling. Croman will have to answer to the action by March 16. The next court date for the wider case against Croman for his alleged behavior at 159 Stanton St. is April 4.

Tenant attorney Sherief Gaber with the Urban Justice Center said the nonprofit agency had taken similar actions against Croman in the past and is optimistic about the case for the evacuated tenants.

"Our office had represented tenants who were displaced by Steve Croman in similar circumstances, in which fireproofing had been ripped out by contractors and tenants were vacated," Gaber said. "So, it's something that we've seen before and we believe we will get the tenants back into their homes in a safe environment as soon as possible."

The front door of 159 Stanton St. is plastered with D.O.B. violations and stop-work orders. Croman has also posted work permits for other properties just inside the hallway. One tenant believes Croman was trying to pull a fast one on residents and hoping they didn't check the addresses on the permits.

"He's hoping we're not literate," the tenant said.

Meanwhile, Croman's spokesperson claimed that tenants blocked access to the building, "in and out of court," to allow for repairs, contending that they would allow access if they were "genuinely motivated" to get repairs done. He also claimed that tenants had asked for an astronomical \$300,000-per-unit buyout, although the tenant association denies that.

"We tenants as a group made no solicitation of a buyout, and are unaware of any such attempt," the association said in a statement. "So this allegation is a red herring meant to distract from the real issue of disregard for

human safety in 9300 Realty buildings, including fire hazards and physical dangers like collapsing ceilings. Court-ordered repairs were made to these apartments in January and February, and we tenants welcomed them. Now we look forward to more repairs ordered by D.O.B. being made, so that we can return to our homes, and can live in a safe, secure and structurally sound building.”

Half-a-dozen local politicians at the city and state level wrote a joint letter to Croman early last week demanding he address numerous issues at 159 Stanton St., including “makeshift staircases made from plywood; broken windows; water leaks throughout the building; multiple break-ins due to lack of basic security measures; hazardous construction; and a general lack of repairs.”

Assemblymember Yuh-Line Niou, one of the letter’s signatories, called Croman’s behavior “unacceptable and infuriating” on Monday, and vowed to “continue to push for repairs and tenants’ safety.”

Croman owns roughly 145 commercial and residential properties throughout Manhattan, many of them in the East Village. He is known to pursue tenant buyouts and reportedly pushed his employees to obtain them, allegedly offering up to \$10,000 bonuses for each buyout they secured.

Both commercial and residential tenants claim Croman would just happen to “lose” their rent payments and then sue them over it or try to evict them, in hopes they would give up and move out. Some of his commercial tenants accuse him of cutting off their utilities. As previously reported in The Villager, one commercial tenant, the operator of Caffè Vivaldi on Jones St., said Croman consistently tried to charge the business rent for inaccessible space.