



Dan Garodnick. | William Alatrisme/NYC Council

Council-backed tenant advocacy group targets 'bad' landlords

By **SALLY GOLDENBERG** and KELLY WEILL | 08/11/2015 05:28 AM EDT

As the de Blasio administration engaged in a push to reform rent regulations in June, a coalition of tenant advocates and neighborhood organizations seeking to protect renters from landlord harassment received a \$1.25 million boost in City Council funding for the upcoming fiscal year.

Stabilizing NYC, which formed last year with seed money from Councilman Dan Garodnick, has since created its own version of the typical "bad landlords" watch list, including seven companies that own or run a combined 509 buildings throughout the city.

The group and Garodnick say the additional money will be put toward coming up with permanent solutions — including possible legislation — to push back against predatory landlords, while providing legal services and other assistance for tenants.

"The impetus for this was the increased number of over-leveraged properties in New York City, where the motivation by an owner was either to push rent-stabilized tenants out and raise rents or to starve buildings for repairs to reduce costs," Garodnick said in a recent interview.

In addition to forming Stabilizing NYC, Garodnick, along with Councilmen Ritchie Torres and Jumaane Williams, simultaneously created the Coalition Against Predatory Equity, which is made up of 55 elected officials at all levels of government to preserve the city's affordable housing stock.

"They are sharing resources and expertise, the ability to teach tenants what their rights are and collectively to fight back," Garodnick said.

The group said it has held 255 tenant association meetings in the past year and represented more than 100 renters in litigation against allegedly abusive landlords. It filed another 125 administrative complaints on behalf of tenants and created a database of more than 1,500 properties, organized by owner and borough, where it believes renters are being harassed by landlords.

Kerri White, a policy director at Stabilizing NYC, said landlords who try to push rent-stabilized tenants out of their units are often over-leveraged and need more money to pay down their own debts.

"It's not about having debt; it's about having debt that's not sustainable by the current income of the building," she said in a recent interview.

So building owners often turn off heat and hot water, add legal and damage fees to monthly rents or refuse to maintain homes in a push to get rid of tenants.

"They'll just tack on these extra fees to the rent, like washing machine fees and air conditioner fees. For some tenants it ends up being hundreds of dollars a month," White added.

Once apartments are vacated and rent has reached a certain threshold, landlords can remove them from regulation and charge whatever rent they choose. The vacancy threshold was recently increased in Albany from \$2,500 to \$2,700 per month.

During its first year, Stabilizing NYC sent workers on foot patrol into buildings to interview tenants and assess conditions, based on tips or other information they surmised.

Among the building manager and landlords that ended up on the final list is Alma Realty Corp. The group said it identified seven buildings in northern Manhattan and two

in Brooklyn where tenants reported being harassed, structures were in disrepair, vermin infested the halls and Con Edison was suing for stolen gas for laundry rooms.

Alma worked closely with the de Blasio administration and the Council on an affordable housing development, Astoria Cove, which was heralded as the first deal requiring affordable housing through a city rezoning. Construction has yet to begin and many speculate Alma may end up selling the property.

Anthony Novella, an attorney for Alma, said in an email that the properties cited by Stabilizing NYC were "transferred from owners in distress and were inherited with a number of conditions that are being fixed by the current owners. The current owners of these properties are committed to investing the time and resources necessary to restore and improve these properties so that they will serve the long term needs of the existing tenants, the community and the owner."

"Alma Realty is committed to ending the problems caused by the practices of prior owners," Novella added.

He also said rent-regulated tenants' rights "are well understood and always protected."

Other managers on the list include Coltown Properties, Icon, Benedict Realty Group (B.R.G.) and Steve Croman. They either did not respond to messages or declined to comment. POLITICO New York is withholding the names of the final two because they could not be reached. White said B.R.G. has begun to make repairs in one of its Queens buildings, after a lawsuit.

Tiara McLaughlin, one of the group's tenant organizers, said when she started knocking on doors to reach tenants, they generally welcomed her in so she could see the poor conditions in their units.

Those living in market-rate apartments were even more anxious for help than those in rent-stabilized units.

"The thing that makes Stabilizing NYC different from other coalitions is we're target based. Our groups are organized around one landlord," she said in a phone interview. "Making it citywide and impactful is the next step. ... When landlords see that all the legal action is directed at one landlord we're targeting, they'll want to clean up."

NOTE: The original version of this article has been updated to include Torres and Williams as creators of the Coalition Against Predatory Equity.