

# Town & Village

50 CENTS  
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## Tenants slam housing judge

By Lyndee Yamshon

Tenants claiming to live in a "danger zone" have criticized a judge for failing to make an example of their "slumlord."

Judge Margaret McGowan fined landlord Steve Croman \$1275 for dragging his heels over repairs to the building he owns at 432 East 13th Street. She also ordered him to complete the work within the next five months.

However, tenant Brenda Hill described the decision as "a slap in the face" to residents, adding, "\$1275 is nothing to him [Croman]."

"We want him to adhere to the court-ordered tenants safety plan that mandates tenants be alerted before services are turned off. We want clean halls and the dusty construction sites sealed.

"But most of all, we want the legal system to hold him accountable and set a precedent for all landlords."

Several tenants of the building took Croman to court following what they claimed was years of his neglect, ignoring over 50 violations issued by building authorities and forcing residents out to make way for "luxury renters."

A string of hazards cited by tenants include dangerous levels of lead dust, cracked exterior walls and structural faults.

Hill, a stay at home mom, has also had no gas to operate her stove since Con-Ed shut down her supply on December 20 citing "improper construc-

tion practices."

A member of the building's tenant association, she said was worried about the health of her 22-month-old baby. Sixteen of the other remaining tenants in the 39-unit building joined the legal action because they were fed up with Croman's apparent disregard for every city agency.

Now, however, they've been left considering whether to appeal Judge McGowan's decision or wait and hope the Housing and Preservation and Development (HPD) can get the landlord to finally finish repairs.

HPD spokeswoman, Kim Brown, confirmed the building had 50 violations from her agency, although she said that wasn't "too alarming, considering there are 38 apartment units."

However, it is a record that demands investigation, according City councilwoman, Margarita Lopez, who has asked Attorney General Elliot Spitzer to investigate Croman.

"Building after building, he's removing tenants illegally and converting the apartments to luxury housing," said Lopez.

"I made it my business to get the tenants into the office of the Attorney General. I think it's criminal what's going on."

Included on the tenants' list of complaints, is Croman's allegedly false self-

Continued on Page 23

TOWN & VILLAGE ■ THURSDAY, JANUARY 24, 2002 ■ 23

## 'Slumlord'

Continued from Page 6.

certification of completed structural repairs.

Lopez said, "The bottom line is, self-certification should not exist. It's crazy to tell somebody to self certify their own work.

"On top of that, there's no penalty for lying. I don't understand what the logic of it is. In regard to this particular building, it's clear neglect on the part of the Buildings Department to monitor what's going on, with no enforcement of the law."

Assemblyman Steve Sanders has also urged the cessation of renovation work until the building meets codes and backed Lopez' call for an investigation into how building plans can proceed when there are substantial violations associated with that work.

New York City has a self-certification system where a landlord's licensed architects and engineers pledge, without substantiation by a public agency, that they are following building regulations when plans are submitted and as work proceeds.

"In the case of 432 East 13th Street," said Sanders, "there are a variety of violations that place in question the structural integrity of the building.

"There's a real problem with this process of self certification, where a

landlord can certify himself up to code without serious consequences if there are violations.

"I happen to believe that any architect who certifies something which is false should lose his license and any owner that has knowledge that work is being done not in accordance to safety regulations should be severely fined."

Ilyse Fink, spokeswoman for the City buildings department, said the landlord received three violations from her department during current construction and said he was now "doing what he had to do" to correct problems.

"Of course we want him to be up to code and we've made several visits to that address," said Fink. "However, the reality is that people are uncomfortable when heavy construction is being conducted where they live."

HPD's spokeswoman explained how the department has three violation levels, A, B and C with C being the most serious, such as having no heat or hot water. Croman has received six A violations, 34 B violations and 10 C violations.

She said litigators were in the process of drawing up a settlement agreement which would, hopefully, see the work completed by June.

Steve Croman declined comment on this report.