

18 Bills With One Goal: Bad-Landlord Crackdown

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The City Council speaker is introducing a raft of bills on Wednesday aimed at stopping landlords from harassing rent-regulated tenants to force them out of their apartments.

The speaker, Corey Johnson, said the package of 18 bills is intended to close loopholes and address abusive practices identified in The New York Times's recent series, "Unsheltered," which showed how some large landlords exploit New York's fragmented regulatory system to push apartments out of regulation.

"It seems like landlords and developers come first," said Mr. Johnson, a Manhattan Democrat. "For tenants, it doesn't seem even like they are an afterthought. They are not a thought at all."

With Mr. Johnson behind them, the bills have a good chance of passage in the Democrat-controlled Council. Still, the legislation is likely to face stiff opposition from New York's real estate industry, and it was not immediately clear whether the bills would have the full support of Mayor Bill de Blasio.

"We are committed to preventing displacement and fighting harassment on every front, and look forward to reviewing these bills," said Jane Meyer, a spokeswoman for the mayor.

John H. Banks, president of the Real Estate Board of New York, said whatever legislation the Council considers "should target bad actors without making it costlier and onerous for the vast majority of law abiding property owners."

Councilman Robert E. Cornegy Jr., a Brooklyn Democrat who is chairman of the housing committee, said the bills should help protect the city's stock of rent-regulated apartments. "We're in a crisis," he said. "I think this package of bills really closes some of the worst loopholes we have."

One aim of the legislation is to crack down on the practice of using construction to harass rent-regulated tenants, through several small but important measures. The bills, for instance, would create new penalties for professionals caught lying on building permit applications about whether a building is occupied. It would also require new inspections of building sites to make sure tenants are not being harmed by construction.

Roughly half of the 2.2 million rental units in New York City are regulated, which means rents are only supposed to go up a small amount every year and tenants are supposed to be protected against unlawful evictions.

A relatively new class of mega-landlords, whose business model is built on pushing out rent-regulated tenants, has exploited loopholes in city and state laws in recent years to move these regulated apartments into the free market, either by paying tenants to leave or by harassing them through construction and litigation in housing court. Once a regulated apartment is empty, a landlord can charge more rent.

State lawmakers plan to consider overhauling the rent-regulation laws next year. But city departments enforce construction and tenant-protection laws.

The Times's series highlighted pressure points where the city's enforcement system failed: Architects and engineers faced few repercussions for lying on building permit applications. Landlords were fined little, if at all, for illegally converting one-bedroom apartments into four-bedroom apartments. Tenant-protection plans, when they existed, were often vague cookie-cutter provisions.

City regulators neglected to investigate whether an owner who was caught illegally gutting apartments in one building was doing so elsewhere. Inspectors tossed out complaints about illegal construction simply because they could not gain access to the building. When landlords were caught violating the building code, tenants were not informed about hearings on the violations.

The bills being introduced would strengthen requirements for tenant-protection plans on construction sites, create new penalties for lying on permit applications and require the city to inspect an owner's entire portfolio if the owner is caught illegally gutting apartments.

The proposed legislation also would require landlords to report buyout packages to the city and to provide the last four years of an apartment's rental history to new tenants. Other bills in the package would require the city to inform tenants about violation hearings so they could attend and would create more oversight for process servers in housing court cases.

One of the most ambitious proposals takes aim at the lack of communication among city and state entities, requiring agencies to share information that would help them to identify landlords who skirt tenant protections.

"Our enforcement agencies have for far too long been working in silos, which creates a ruinous regulatory dead zone," said Aaron Carr, the executive director of the nonprofit Housing Rights Initiative. "This is a model bill because it pushes our agencies on a city and state level to work together."

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