

Slumlord Showdown

Mayoral wannabe Chris Quinn treads cautiously in housing fight

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published: April 10, 2007

Tenants had plenty of cause to cheer City Council Speaker Christine Quinn's announcement last week that she'd reached agreement with the real estate industry and the Bloomberg administration on new legislation to give added muscle to city sanctions against bad landlords. Affordable housing in New York is quickly slip-sliding away, a fact dramatically underscored a day before Quinn's announcement when the Furman Center for Real Estate and Urban Policy revealed that the number of rental apartments affordable to families making \$33,000 a year—about what a starting firefighter earns—fell by a whopping 205,000 between 2002 and 2005. And the condition of low-cost rental units is also worsening as serious violations in apartments have soared. Sentiment aside, that's a script for economic trouble, the center noted, since businesses require a livable and affordable housing stock for their workforce.

So Quinn's plan to address at least part of that crisis by having the city target the 200 residential buildings with the worst record of housing code violations in a bid to keep them habitable and affordable was welcome news. Under the "Safe Housing Act," the city will compel landlords to make needed building-wide repairs, such as new boilers, plumbing, or electrical systems, or face the prospect of having the city do the work, billing owners for the cost.

Quinn said she'd been working with Brooklyn councilwoman Letitia James, who had pushed for the new legislation, since taking office as Speaker in January 2006. Quinn hailed the bill as "an historic overhaul" of the way the city handles bad landlords.

"This is the first time a housing bill has been introduced that has been supported by the administration and property owners," said Quinn as she stood before the cameras on a rain-swept Thursday morning in the City Hall rotunda, surrounded by tenants and their banners. "This shows we can find commonality."

But the bill also shows how closely Quinn, who is expected to run for mayor in 2009 and is already raising funds from major real estate industry figures, is sticking to her cautious, don't-make-waves approach to governing. Advocates, who began pushing for changes under prior council speaker Gifford Miller, were hoping for a major boost from Quinn, who was herself a feisty housing organizer before turning to politics. Instead, they say, Quinn's office insisted that, rather than engage in a public battle over the bill, she wanted a sign-off from both the mayor and real estate leaders before releasing the legislation.

And while tenant advocates have declared themselves satisfied with the ultimate outcome of those talks, they politely avoid discussing the backstory of the bill which represents a watered-down version of earlier attempts to put stronger teeth into city housing code enforcement.

For one thing, veteran organizers point out that the city has long held the power to undertake building-wide repairs in emergency cases but has been reluctant to do so because of high costs and potential legal battles. "We have always had the right to do cellar-to-roof repairs. It is something HPD [Department of Housing Preservation and Development] used to do but stopped doing," says a former top city housing official.

HPD spokesman Neill Coleman acknowledges that the city already has the right to replace faulty boilers and other systems but says the new legislation strengthens those powers. "What it provides is a new framework for targeting repairs on those really bad buildings," says Coleman.

The bill's biggest impact, veterans suggest, may be that for the first time it formally obligates the city to address worst-case housing scenarios. But as noteworthy as that achievement may be, the new bill omitted tougher sanctions that tenant organizers had hoped to win. Earlier versions of the legislation, initially introduced back in 2005 as "The Healthy Homes Act," required that landlords make repairs within 30 days, as opposed to the four months allotted in Quinn's version. Organizers, backed by Councilwoman James and other legislators, had also sought to give the city an even bigger hammer over slumlords by ordering owners to pay triple the cost of any re-inspections or repairs of hazardous violations that went uncured.

Also still absent from the council's docket, even though Quinn promised in her January State of the City speech to provide it, is a new provision sought by organizers that would allow tenants to withhold rent payments when landlord harassment has been proven.

Quinn spokeswoman Maria Alvarado says her boss is committed to the anti-harassment measure and expects it to reach the council shortly. As for the new Safe Homes Act, Alvarado says: "It's not fair to call it a weakened bill. Ask tenants and councilmembers; they'll back that up."

But while organizers uniformly declare themselves glad to have the legislation, they admit they had hoped for much more. "It was the best they could get and it was better than nothing," says one citywide housing advocate.

"More than half the battle is to first get HPD interested in a building," says Ray Brescia, a housing attorney and associate director of the Urban Justice Center, who worked for more than a year to help craft the bill. "And there's no better tool than to help the city tell a bad landlord, 'You know what? Either you make the repairs or we will.' "