

Tenants and Local Electeds Tackle Illegal Hotels

By Shannon Flaherty,
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On Thursday, June 15th, more than 250 Manhattan tenants packed into the auditorium at Hartley House on West 46th Street to hear tenant leaders, affordable housing advocates and elected officials address a growing problem in Clinton/Hell's Kitchen and other New York neighborhoods: the proliferation of illegal hotels in residential buildings.

Vivian Riffelmacher, a tenant at the Dexter House on West 86th Street, told the audience that after years of living in a low-cost Single Room Occupancy building, she noticed that the landlord had begun warehousing available rooms to rent them to tourists. At the same time, her building management began harassing her and her neighbors, bringing frivolous eviction cases, cutting off building services and, in more than one case, physically assaulting long-term tenants of the building.

Of the hundreds of people in the audience, many nodded sympathetically; the growth of illegal hotels and aggressive harassment of tenants have gone hand in hand in recent years, as some landlords realize they can make more money renting apartments overnight to tourists than they can by renting legally to long-term residents.

City Councilmember Gale Brewer, a leader of a task force developed to examine the problem, said that many residents in her Upper West Side district have been concerned about illegal hotels in their buildings or on their blocks. "The victims of illegal hotels are too often rent-controlled or stabilized tenants, and the effects can be felt across our neighborhoods and the entire borough," Brewer said.

"Residents throughout Manhattan are waking up to find that they suddenly live in a hotel - but without the room service," said City Councilmember Dan Garodnick, who also participated in the Town Hall meeting.

The decision of some landlords to operate tourist hotels in buildings that are legally required to be residential has begun to cause myriad problems for the buildings' long-term tenants. In addition to Vivian Riffelmacher's concern about the harassment that often goes hand-in-hand with illegal use, tenants are worried about the compromised security of their buildings, the effect on their quality of life and the loss of affordable housing as apartments are removed from the long-term housing market.

"Tenants have been forced to endure a



State Senator Tom Duane, A Longtime Tenant/Housing Rights Advocate, Addresses The Town Hall Meeting On Illegal Hotels

dangerous situation with strangers coming in and out of their building at all hours of the day and night," said State Senator Tom Duane, who spoke at the meeting.

The existence of illegal hotels is also damaging to tourism in New York. Visitors who are hoping for a stay in a fancy hotel in the city and wind up in a subpar apartment are far from pleased and some have begun telling their stories to the media.

State Assembly Member Dick Gottfried, a member of the Illegal Hotels Task Force, said that advocates for the tourism industry should join his constituents in their concern over illegal hotels. "Landlords are using reputable websites like expedia.com to advertise phony hotels," Gottfried said. "Tourists are being duped and are missing out on the quality experience that draws people to New York."

Neighborhood groups that represent tenants are joining elected officials to address the illegal hotels issue. Leaders of Housing Conservation Coordinators and the West Side SRO Law Project, the organizations that co-hosted the Town Hall meeting, say that many tenants have come to their offices worried about illegal hotels in their building, and that the growth of illegal hotels constitutes a threat to the sustainability of their neighborhoods.

"We're fighting on a variety of fronts to preserve affordable housing on the West Side," said John Raskin, a community organizer at Housing Conservation Coordinators, who acted as the moderator at the Town Hall meeting. "When landlords take apartments

off the market to rent them to tourists, it makes it that much harder for New Yorkers to find somewhere affordable to live."

Housing advocates and elected officials identified a variety of solutions to the illegal hotels problem, but told tenants that guaranteeing enforcement of the law will require work and advocacy by tenants and community members. City agencies that have effectively closed down illegal operations in residential buildings are not now sufficiently funded to tackle the illegal hotels problem; tenant activist Tom Cayler told the audience that the Mayor's Office of Midtown Enforcement successfully closed a brothel his landlord had been operating on West 45th Street, but that the office didn't have the resources to replicate their success in many more buildings.

The elected officials who attended the Town Hall pledged that they would work to increase funding for effective enforcement and close loopholes in existing laws, but that they would need tenants to help them by testifying at hearings, speaking to the press and organizing their neighbors to help out.

John Raskin, the community organizer at Housing Conservation Coordinators, outlined a three-step process tenants should undertake if their landlord is operating an illegal hotel in their building. First, he said, tenants must call 311, even if it's not sufficient to solve the problem.

Second, tenants should contact HCC at 212-541-5996 or jraskin@hcc-nyc.org with a detailed explanation of their issue; HCC and local elected officials are compiling a comprehensive list of affected buildings and need first-hand information from tenants.

Finally, tenants should talk to their neighbors about the issue; HCC has petitions available asking Mayor Bloomberg to prioritize funding for agencies to combat the illegal hotels phenomenon, and more tenant signatures on the illegal hotels position bolsters the case of HCC and the elected officials as they work to solve the problem.

Anyone who would like to get more involved can also contact HCC. As Assembly Member Linda Rosenthal told the audience on June 15th, "We must work together to protect our residential areas from this new landlord scheme that puts profits above the law, tramples on the rights of longtime tenants and hastens the demise of affordable housing."

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