

Rooms at the 'inns'

Landlords illegally turning rent-regulated units into hotels

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UPPER WEST SIDE. The city's Web site shows the Imperial Court on 79th Street is certified as a single-room-occupancy apartment building, with 227 rent-regulated units and 21 shared kitchenettes.

But when local Assemblywoman Linda Rosenthal logged on to the Imperial Court's Web site, she was able to book a hotel room there for \$69 a night. She had no ID when she walked in on Saturday, but the front desk still gave her a key card to Room 331.

"Rent-stabilized apartments all over my district are being illegally converted to hotel rooms at an alarming rate," Rosenthal said. "It's unacceptable to allow landlords to make a buck from illegally squandering affordable units."

To combat the growing problem, Assemblyman Richard Gottfried formed a task force last year with state Sen. Liz Krueger and



Assemblywoman Linda Rosenthal holds the key to the illegal hotel room she rented Saturday night at the Imperial Court, an SRO on 79th Street. "When I checked in, there was a long line of people with suitcases, backpacks, waiting behind me," she said. "I was then in the elevator with people who've been here 20 years. Unfortunately, they've had to learn to live with strangers."

City Councilwoman Gale Brewer. So far, they've located about 100 rent-regulated apartment buildings in

Manhattan that are illegally acting as hotels.

"The city has been trying to crack down on these

operations, but they keep running into loopholes in the law," Gottfried explained.

The trio of lawmakers is working on new state and city legislation. Existing state law, Gottfried said, is "written in fairly flexible language about what's allowed in an apartment building and what isn't." In addition to toughening up the definition of residential use, the new state bill would make it illegal to lease rent-stabilized units to commercial entities. "What happens is a company will rent out a couple dozen apartments in a building and then rent them out as hotel rooms," Gottfried said.

Landlords who break the law as illegal hoteliers are not only attracted to charging nightly rates, Gottfried said. "If they get rid of their permanent tenants, it's easier for them to convert the building to a co-op or condominium."

The prospect of making a killing leads to tenant harassment, said John Raskin, of Housing Conser-

A woman's story

Hortense Bermudez, a retired dressmaker, hopes she can hold on to the one-bedroom apartment she's lived in since 1969. Three years ago she started to notice strangers wandering the halls of her building in Hell's Kitchen. "Sixty percent of the apartments are now luxury hotel rooms, and my landlord is trying to evict me," she said. "He claims I haven't paid rent in nine months, but that's a lie. He's also asking for \$10,000 in attorneys' fees. My neighbors are all seniors. They're scared to death and won't come forward. It's just a nightmare living there, but I have no choice. This is my home."

vation Coordinators, which politely "stormed" the lobby of the Imperial Court yesterday to highlight the city's loss of affordable housing to illegal hotels.

Even when landlords are caught, Raskin said, "the penalties are so weak that it's not much of a disincentive." He welcomes Brewer's proposal to raise penalties, citing one nearby landlord. "Night after night, he was using dozens of rooms as an illegal hotel, making thousands of dollars, and he was fined \$400 once."