

WEST SIDE THE SPIRIT

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SROs Under Siege

Tourists over tenants?

By Charlotte Eichna

Multi-person bikes swerving across Times Square aren't the only unpleasant side-effect of the city's booming tourism business.

Elected officials and housing advocates say it's common for low-income rooms to be rented out as short-term hotel accommodations, depleting the stock of affordable housing and tarnishing the city's reputation

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The aftermath of a Feb. 11 rally on the northwest corner of 79th Street and Riverside Drive. Tenants, housing advocates and elected officials attempted to storm an SRO nearby.

Pols: Using SROs as hotels cuts housing stock

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with visitors. The practice is most common in single room occupancy—or SRO—units, which can be rented out to tourists at a much higher rate than tenants pay.

A much-publicized “storming” of one West Side SRO, the Imperial Court on West 79th Street, was staged last weekend, followed by a press conference where several legislative initiatives to combat the problem were announced. At the top of the list: fining landlords on a per-day, per-unit basis that would compound daily, rather than fining them once for several violations. The current penalty structure is, “less than the cost of doing business,” according to John

ago. By her estimate, there are nearly 90 rooms in the building, which has more than 220 units, being rented out to tourists.

“We did a key count,” she said. “I think we’re getting toward 90.”

Calls to Imperial Court’s owner, Michael Edelstein, were not returned. The building is specified as an SRO on its certificate of occupancy.

Raskin said it was hard to estimate how many residential buildings also operated hotels, but he said that his organization had compiled a list of nearly 100 buildings all over Manhattan where tenants had complained about tourists. He stressed that the list was only a snapshot; his organization had

Raskin, director of organizing for Housing Conservation Coordinators, which put together the rally.

“This has become one of the primary business models for removing SRO units from the housing market,” he said.

Other legislative efforts would prevent leasing rent-regulated apartments to companies; give city inspectors the power to enforce rent laws; and tighten up long-term tenant requirements for residential-use buildings.

Assembly Member Linda Rosenthal said she booked a hotel room for the weekend at the Imperial Court while posing as a tourist. Such a practice, she said, is “widespread” in her district. Landlords either deny that hotel rentals are illegal, or simply disregard fines altogether.

“They just continue because it’s so profitable,” she said.

Annie Venesky, a freelance writer, said she has been living in the Imperial Court for six years and pays about \$460 per month for a 10-by-10 room and access to a communal bathroom. Tourists from all over have been staying at the residence, she said, and the travel website WooGo.com even had an office in the lobby until about a week

not verified all the complaints and many more were probably not being reported.

Christopher Carroll, who lives in the Dexter House SRO on West 86th Street, attended the rally dressed as a tourist in a floral shirt and toting a pink umbrella. He said Dexter House also regularly puts up short-term visitors. “I meet the tourists and they tell me which rooms they’re staying in,” Carroll said.

Other tenants who attended the event complained of harassment from landlords who wanted to evict them and security problems created by tourists being housed in their buildings.

“The illegal hotel business steals rental apartments from the city. It makes life miserable for the residential tenants,” said Assembly Member Richard Gottfried.

Legitimate hotel operators were also hurt by the practice, he said, both because they were losing business and because the “extremely poor quality accommodations” at many of the illegal hotels soured visitors’ impressions of the city.

Other elected officials who gathered at the rally included Borough President Scott Stringer, State Sen. Liz Krueger and Council Member Gale A. Brewer. ■