Bills Aimed at Protecting NYC Renters from Landlords during Construction Work

by Ryan Haas

It’s never easy living in the most expensive city in the world — New York City.

With rent being outrageously priced just to live in an over-sized closet, tenants always appear to be at the mercy of the landlord.

That is, of course, until New York City Council members announced a plan on Wednesday to prevent landlords from pressuring tenants to move out by creating an "unlivable" through construction work.

The dozen bills follow accounts of residents enduring late-night noise, harmful levels of dust and damage to their apartments, which some of the irate tenants claim were efforts to get them to leave their apartments. Landlords are expected to provide tenant-protection plans when they do renovations in occupied buildings. Landlords often tell the city that their buildings are vacant, earning them construction permits without verification.

The bills purpose is to impose more of an aggressive role on the city’s Building Department by responding to construction complaints faster and increasing...
inspections to confirm landlords’ compliance with safety requirements.

“It’s about stepping up enforcement,” one of 11 council members sponsoring the bills Stephen Levin told The New York Times. “We’re losing regulated units every year to decontrol and unscrupulous activities by landlords.”

Levin, a Democrat, remains to be the lead sponsor of a bill that would create a unit within the Buildings Department dedicated to solely responding to complaints related to work without permits and to extensive renovations, which the bill defines as work in more than 10 percent of the building. This "real-time enforcement unit," Mr. Levin said, would respond within two hours after a complaint about unpermitted work, addressing the dilemma of missed violations since inspectors show up after the work has stopped.

Two other bills were designed to target the practice of landlords falsely claiming their buildings are unoccupied. The Buildings Department will review occupancy claims in certain cases, rather than rely on the word of owners or owners’ agents.

Dozens of tenant advocacy groups that have lobbied for and helped draft the legislation, saying construction inside buildings has increased in areas like Crown Heights in Brooklyn and Lower East Side in Manhattan in just the past three to five years. While some landlords try to maximize rents by renovating vacant apartments, some try to make life so miserable for rent-stabilized tenants that they move out, which is then turned around and rented out for higher rates.

“It’s a violent assault on the tenant — to have a ceiling collapse on you or the walls shaking,” said Brandon Kielbasa, director of organizing for the group Cooper Square Committee. “It’s really some of the worst psychologically and physically threatening harassment we see.”