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Promote Affordable Housing & Access to Housing Services

The current economic decline is exacerbating New York City's already severe shortage of quality affordable housing. In the non-luxury market, rents continue to rise while incomes fall, worsening the housing crisis for millions of low- to mid-income families. As the number of subsidized and rent-regulated housing units falls, more and more city residents experience housing hardships. The decline in real estate values leaves many tenants in overvalued properties at risk of harassment, abuse, and loss of essential services. Yet, the devaluation of many of these properties offers the city an opportunity to transform some of the properties into permanent affordable housing.

Loss of Affordable Housing Units Continues an Unsettling Trend

New York City lost more than 205,000 affordable, private residential housing units between 2002 and 2005. During the same period, rents rose faster than incomes, according to the Furman Center for Real Estate and Urban Policy.

The percentage of low-income households facing one or more housing hardships (e.g., falling behind in rent or mortgage payments, doubling-up, or seeking shelter) grew from 36% to 52% from 2002 to 2006, according to a Community Service Society survey of low-income New Yorkers.ⁱ

- The number of safe and affordable units for low- to mid-income families decreased by nearly 17% from 2002 to 2008.
- In 2008, 4 out of 5 low-income tenants in the private market were paying more than 30% of their income on rent; nearly 1 in 2 were paying more than 50% of their income on rent.ⁱⁱ
- These housing challenges are disproportionately impacting the city's minority and ethnic communities: increases in rent burdens were most significant in black, Hispanic, and Asian households from 2005 to 2008.

Recommendations

- Create an Informal Housing Pilot Program.
- Reintroduce and Enact Intro 750, the Asthma Free Housing Act, to decrease indoor asthma triggers.
- Increase enforcement to counter increase of "demolition by neglect."
- Enact Intro 87, Proposed Corporate Landlord Registration Legislation.

Immigrant communities are particularly hard hit by the lack of affordable housing.

- Immigrants make up a disproportionate share of the low-wage workforce in New York and are less likely to live in government-subsidized affordable housing.
- Around 1 in 2 immigrant households pays more than 30% of income on rent; 1 in 4 pays more than 50% of income on rent.ⁱⁱⁱ
- The situation is even worse for low-income immigrants; 4 in 5 pay more than 30% of income on rent.



- 70% of NYC immigrants surveyed by the New York Immigrant Housing Collaborative (coordinated by the NYIC) reported that “most” or “a lot” of immigrants they know live in poor or dangerous housing conditions.
- 71% reported that housing was unaffordable^{iv}.

The growing shortage of affordable housing leaves many New Yorkers, including low-income immigrant families, with huge rent burdens and few good housing options. We urge the city to support the building and maintenance of affordable housing for low- and moderate-income New Yorkers in all five boroughs while also preserving the current stock of affordable housing, with a particular focus on housing for low-income households.

Need to Improve Access to Housing Services

For some immigrants, housing problems are further complicated by communication obstacles at city agencies. Many immigrant families endure deplorable and dangerous housing conditions because their landlords refuse to make the necessary repairs. Due to language barriers faced by more than two million New Yorkers who are limited English proficient, many immigrant renters are unable to communicate with the housing inspectors who have the power to force negligent landlords to make repairs. As a result, immigrants are more likely to live in substandard housing conditions, and many are less likely to report complaints or seek assistance from the very agencies that are charged with protecting them. We urge Mayor Bloomberg, the City Council, and the city’s Department of Housing Preservation and Development (HPD) to continue their efforts to improve language access to city housing services. The issuance of Executive Order 120, which requires all city agencies to provide language access, is a step in the right direction. Adequate implementation is needed, however, to ensure that immigrant New Yorkers are able to live in safe and affordable housing.

Detailed Recommendations:

Create an Informal Housing Pilot Program. The city should create an “accessory dwelling unit” program allowing existing units that are safe but currently prohibited by law to be permitted and regulated under the city’s housing and building codes. Legalizing these units would increase the supply of affordable housing, provide occupants of informal units with tenant protections, and allow for an accurate count of population size. The city

could begin with a targeted pilot program to test the policy mechanism.

Reintroduce and Enact Intro 750, the Asthma Free Housing Act, to decrease indoor asthma triggers. This legislation would require landlords to remove asthma and allergy triggers from dwellings. It would codify the current mold remediation guidelines into enforceable regulations; require stronger enforcement from HPD in cases of mold and pest infestation; require better training for inspectors, landlords, and property managers; and expand outreach to tenants. (Lead sponsor: Councilmember Rosie Mendez.)

Increase enforcement to counter increase of “demolition by neglect.” Community organizations have increasingly observed a pattern of property owners ignoring building code violations, causing buildings to drastically deteriorate. Predatory landlords of rent-regulated buildings have been using this tactic of intentional neglect to obtain demolition rights, remove tenants, and replace these demolished buildings with other capital projects. The Department of Buildings must be empowered with new legislation to enforce landlord remediation of issued violations. In instances of demolition, the landlord must provide comparable sources of housing for the displaced tenants.

Enact Intro 87, Proposed Corporate Landlord Registration Legislation. This proposed legislation will amend the New York City Administrative Code to require landlords organized as corporations and partnerships to register the names of their individual principals with the city. This will ensure that tenants will be able to determine who actually owns the property in which they live. The lack of transparency of ownership makes it difficult for tenants and their advocates to resolve problems outside of litigation. (Lead Sponsor: Councilmember Melissa Mark-Viverito)

ⁱ Victor Bach and Tom Waters, (2006) Making the Rent, 2002 to 2005: Changing Rent Burdens & Housing Hardships Among Low-Income New Yorkers, Community Service Society.

ⁱⁱ Furman Center for Real Estate & Urban Policy, (2010) State of New York City’s Housing and Neighborhoods 2009 Edition

ⁱⁱⁱ Furman Center for Real Estate & Urban Policy, (2009) Key Findings on the Affordability of Rental Housing from New York City’s Housing and Vacancy Survey 2008.

^{iv} Pratt Center for Community Development and the New York Immigrant Housing Collaborative (2008), Confronting the Housing Squeeze: Challenges Facing Immigrant Tenants, and What New York Can Do.