

25,000 rent scams found

EXCLUSIVE

BY MATT CHABAN
and CORKY SIEMASZKO
NEW YORK DAILY NEWS

A TEAM OF state housing investigators has restored 25,000 rent-controlled apartments to the affordable housing rolls since the group began pursuing slumlords last year.

The Tenant Protections Unit was created to investigate landlords rather than relying on property owners' own records to track rent controlled homes.

"We can't wait for tenants to be abused to take action," said the state's Deputy Housing Commissioner Richard White, who runs the unit — which operates as something of a CompStat for apartments.

Landlords are allowed to take rent-controlled or rent stabilized apartments out of the program when the rent hits \$2,500 a month — a system that critics say encourages harassment to get rid of low-paying tenants.

The unit's computers sift through a raft of information on the city's 1 million rent-regulated apartments, spitting out reports whenever something looks suspicious.

That's how the unit nabbed Yeshaya Wasserman, who owns a



Marquetta Bell blasted landlord at her building in Brooklyn.

181-unit complex in Prospect Lefferts Gardens with rent prices only a computer could love.

"Rent would go from \$600 to \$2,501 a month for one apartment, then another is \$800 and it jumps to exactly \$2,501, one's at \$650, and it goes to \$2,501," White explained. "It was definitely cause for concern."

The unit accused Wasserman of a "pattern of abusive behavior and flagrant violations of rent laws." His tenants claim he's been trying to drive out long-term residents for months.

"He wants all the senior citizens and African-Americans out," said Marquetta Bell, a disabled 45-year-

old Gulf War vet who has lived there for over a decade. "He's only moving in young students ... and making them pay triple the rent."

Bell, who suffers from respiratory problems, said she and roommate Ann Sonja Tobierre drew Wasserman's ire when they complained about mold and mildew.

"He was so rude," said Bell. "He said, 'If you don't like it, you can get out.'"

Bell said many of their neighbors did just that, including a 90-year-old woman.

Wasserman did not return calls to his office or his home to answer the claims.

Many rent-regulated apartments in the city remain endangered, but housing advocates say the program is working.

Now that we're finally tracking this, if you see one problem, it's probably a building-wide or company-wide abuse," said Ben Dolchin, executive director of the Association for Neighborhood and Housing Development.

Landlords insist the state is simply on a fishing expedition to score political points.

"There are no guidelines for landlords to follow, only headlines," said Frank Ricci, director of government affairs at the Rent Stabilization Association, a landlord group.

York governor, were Mayor Bloomberg, Gov. Cuomo and Timothy Cardinal Dolan.

Neither Bill de Blasio nor Joe Lhota attended the event, but that didn't stop organizers from roasting the City Hall wanna-bes as part of the dinner's best-known fare — humorous, politically themed speeches.

And that was before Colbert did his mock-political-commentator shtick.

Al Smith IV, the great grandson of the late governor Alfred E. Smith, joked that the 6-foot-5 Bill de Blasio used to be the same height as 5-foot-8 Mayor Bloomberg — "until Bill started hanging out with A-Rod."

He also cracked that much of the money used for the event came from donations originally intended for a lost cause.

"Joe Lhota, thank you for all those donations," Smith said, jabbing at the Republican mayoral candidate's struggling campaign.

Jennifer Fermino

Construction wave building

THE BUILDING boom is back.

Construction this year in New York City is expected to hit pre-bust levels, according to the New York Building Congress, which represents top contractors and construction firms.

The group projects \$31.5 billion in construction spending this year, a 14% rise from last year. It's the first time the industry has spent more than \$30 billion since the crash and the most since 2006.

As a result of all the spending, the industry will create 4,200 new construction jobs for a total of nearly 120,000. That number is expected to rise to 130,000 by 2015, when construction spending is predicted to reach \$37 billion.

Matt Chaban

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