

Better rental housing a step closer for tenants

‘Debate over tighter regulatory system for rental housing in Toronto set to move to City Council next week.’

Toronto tenants are one step closer to safer, cleaner rental housing, with the debate over a new tighter regulatory system set to move to City Council next week.

For the thousands of tenants battling pests or facing maintenance issues the changes can't come soon enough. "We are urgently needing clean and safe homes," said Laurie Simpson, a Toronto tenant and member of ACORN, during a recent deputation before the Licensing and Standards Committee.

The meeting was the last stop for a report produced by Municipal Licensing and Standards staff, who had been working to design and cost out a regulatory system that will be sent to council for approval in mid-December.

The proposed cost of the program is almost \$4.5 million, with 45 per cent of the money expected to be recovered from an annual landlord registration fee, costing \$8 for each unit, 15 per cent from enforcement action, and 40 per cent from property taxes. It will mean six new staff members working in inspection and bylaw enforcement, on top of a staff of 24.

ACORN endorsed the plan, but said the city should hire more than six new staff members, work out stiffer fines for landlords and move quickly towards a visible ranking system, similar to the city's "DineSafe" program. They also want stronger outreach so tenants know how to get inspectors inside their units. "This is where the majority of problems exist and tenant engagement needs to be part of this program, said Simpson, who is also the Weston ACORN chairperson. "After all, isn't this program supposed to be about the tenants?" In May, Simpson spoke with the Star's Laurie Monsebraaten about her more than decade-long wait for a rent-geared-to-income bachelor or one-bedroom apartment in the west end. High rent meant she was barely scraping by.

At City Hall a good part of the meeting was occupied by the debate over whether the registration fee would be passed on to tenants. Daryl Chong, president and chief executive officer of the Greater Toronto Apartment Association, maintained his position that the city's existing inspection tools, coupled with provincial legislation, were sufficient.

"We don't support the creation of any new regime, especially one that creates more red tape," said Chong. "This is just an apartment tenant tax that is exclusively borne by tenants in apartment buildings." Councillor Josh Matlow challenged Chong for using "misleading rhetoric," at the meeting and in a June advertising campaign sponsored by the association and where the fee was described as an apartment tax. "It is not the city at all is it, it is the landlord who will make that deliberate decision whether or not they want to do that," said Matlow. "Do you not acknowledge now that there is no tax being recommended by anyone at all?"

When asked to weigh in, the city's lawyer agreed there are "limited avenues" for the fee — which he clarified is not a tax — to be passed on to tenants and that the provincial rules surrounding that are very clear.

City staff had been tasked to evaluate the value of a licensing system, but determined tougher regulations would be enough to protect renters, without too much red tape.

The current plans proposed collecting data on rental buildings through audits and inspections and then exploring the merits of a program like DineSafe. A motion filed by Matlow asking that staff evaluate the prospect of the sign system and report back in late 2017 did not pass.

At one point, while Councillor Janet Davis was questioning city staff about inspections in notoriously bad buildings, Councillor Giorgio Mammoliti announced he intended to deliberately break quorum and walked out, stating he "doesn't want this thing to go through."

He returned after a few minutes. City Council is scheduled to start on Dec 13.

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