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CRACKING THE CODE

City pols demand more thorough inspections from the Department of Housing Preservation and Development. > *By Geoffrey Gray*

Inspectors aren't completing jobs, violations are going unrecorded and the city's already decrepit housing stock is crumbling further into disrepair, council members and housing advocates said during a hearing at City Hall last week. They were showcasing new legislation that would require city inspectors to conduct full, roof-to-cellar sweeps of buildings whenever a group of tenants requests them.

So far, the bill, Introduction 400, has the support of more than half the council, along with Public Advocate Betsy Gotbaum. Adrian Di Lollo, director of advocacy for the Association of Neighborhood and Housing Development, which helped draft the bill, said that inspectors now only look to investigate specific complaints, and then leave a building when a full sweep could nip other code violations in the bud.

Advocates say the problem is particularly pronounced in low-income neighborhoods. This summer, for instance, Gabriel Thompson, organizer for the Pratt Area Community Council, remembers that tenants from 103 Franklin Street, a three-story building in Bedford-Stuyvesant, filed a Housing Court action against landlord Mayer Brach and the city for possible lead contamination. On May 27, inspectors came to assess the issue and handed Brach one C-level violation, the most serious infraction, for peeling lead-based paint. Only when Thompson and PACC issued a report on the dangers of lead in Bed-Stuy, and pressured the Department of Housing Preservation and Development, did inspectors come back and complete the job. They found 14 additional C-level violations.

"This is only a snapshot of the daily routines of code enforcers," Thompson said. "They're missing a piece of the big picture."

During the hearing, Vito Mustaciulo, associate commissioner of HPD's Enforcement Services, said the bill would compromise the agency's ability to respond quickly to emergency conditions.

Inspectors also say the Bloomberg administration's cost-cutting efforts have made it tougher to get the job done properly. A year ago, the Mayor's office reduced the number of free-parking permits allotted by the Department of Transportation for city officials. So inspectors, who spend most of the day traversing the city, are now getting nailed with tickets. Two tickets roughly equal one week's pay and the city only offers an \$8.40-a-day car allowance.

"It's like a slap in the face," said Joseph Corso, president of the 800-member Allied Building Inspectors union and an inspector for 33 years. Corso says Intro 400 is too aggressive, too burdensome and doesn't address the everyday issues that keep inspectors away from buildings.

"Simple transportation," he said. "That's our biggest problem."