

# THE NORTHWEST CURRENT

## Town hall airs tenant concerns

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At the third annual Citywide Tenant Town Hall last week, affordable-housing advocates touted recent progress in city policies affecting renters. But they said D.C. must do more to ensure low-income residents can afford to live in the city.

Speaking before nearly 200 renters at First Trinity Lutheran Church near Judiciary Square downtown, Farah Fosse, affordable-housing preservation program director for the Latino Economic Development Corp., said the District has made strides in how it deals with housing code violations.

According to Fosse, the Department of Consumer and Regulatory Affairs has stepped up inspections, working to proactively inspect every building in the city instead of simply responding to complaints.

Meanwhile, she said, tenants now have the opportunity to sue landlords who fail to abate housing code violations.

In May, the D.C. Superior Court debuted the Housing Conditions Calendar, which meets every  
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Monday in Courtroom 200.

“We talk with landlords and tenants to determine what the problems are and see if we can get the problems resolved,” explained Associate Judge Melvin Wright. “So if you want something fixed, and you’re trying to get the landlord [to fix it] and he hasn’t, you can file a complaint and the court has the authority to compel the landlord ... to make repairs.”

There were other success stories, too.

Yasmin Romero, president of the tenants association at 3145 Mount Pleasant St. — formerly known as the Deauville — announced that her group has bought the property, which was destroyed by a five-alarm fire in 2008. “We are working together for affordable rents,” she said. “It’s justice.”

And Tesfaye Lencho, who lives north of Military Road on 16th Street, said that — after struggling for years to get necessary repairs to his building — he has begun to see improvements.

“Our housing complex was filled with lots of problems,” he said. “Doors were not locked. Stairwells were not lit properly.” And unwelcome visitors — from cockroaches to criminals — skulked in the stairwells. “Interestingly,” he said, “I ran into a gentleman one time when I went home from work who was eventu-

ally apprehended by police and he had a gun and a knife on him.”

But Lencho said things are better now. At the urging of the Latino Economic Development Corp., he testified before the D.C. Council and formed a tenants association. “There was a corrective action the landlord took because of that,” he said. “Tenants can get together and make their voices known.”

But other renters who attended the summit said plenty of problems remain.

Residents of Lincoln Westmoreland II, a subsidized housing complex in Shaw, said they’re worried about what will happen if their landlord starts charging market rates.

“Right now there are no low-income properties for me and my children to go to,” said resident CaVonn Ellis Smith.

Smith said she’s been on some subsidized housing lists for as long as 14 years, and she’s worried she and her family will have to leave the District. “I’m a native Washingtonian,” she said. “I feel that I should have the choice to stay in Washington. Just because I’m low-income doesn’t mean that I’m not a productive citizen.”

According to Fosse, shoring up the city’s stock of affordable housing is her group’s top priority. And she said tenant purchase is one of the best strategies for maintaining affordable housing in the District. “The buildings that are purchased as co-ops are affordable for at least 40 years,” she said. “Some are put into a permanent housing trust so

that they are affordable in perpetuity.”

Under D.C.’s Tenant Opportunity to Purchase Act, landlords wishing to sell their buildings must give renters the first option to buy. But Fosse said the city’s Housing Production Trust Fund, which loans money to tenants, has diminished during the economic downturn.

“The catch is that now that we’re in bad economic times, there’s actually a bigger opportunity for tenants to negotiate good prices to be able to purchase their buildings,” she said. “But there’s less money to actually buy them. Because the fund for tenant purchase is tied to the tax on real estate.”

Fosse said she and fellow affordable-housing advocates are calling on the city to provide a dedicated, local revenue stream to support the Housing Production Trust Fund.

“We’re asking to start with \$15 million in 2012, and add \$2 million a year until it gets to \$25 million,” she said.

The Latino Economic Development Corp., which sponsored the town hall, is also calling on the D.C. Council to:

- pass legislation to make rent control permanent;
- conduct stringent oversight of the Department of Consumer and Regulatory Affairs’ inspections program and the Superior Court’s Housing Conditions Calendar;
- pass the Increase in Housing Affordability Act of 2009, which would target government funding for affordable housing at D.C.

median income levels instead of area median income;

- ensure that all agencies dealing with tenant issues make information available in all six languages included in the D.C. Language Access Act;
- ensure formal participation by tenant associations in planning for affordable-housing redevelopment;
- institute quarterly stakeholder meetings between tenants and the Department of Consumer and Regulatory Affairs to improve residential inspections; and
- include mold as a housing code violation.