City Council Speaker Christine Quinn addresses the Third Annual West Side Tenants Conference on Saturday. The all-day event, held at the Fordham University School of Law, was attended by more than 300 participants.

Quinn keynote energizes busy tenants’ conference

BY CHRIS LOMBARDI

When City Council Speaker Christine Quinn first took the microphone on Saturday at the Third Annual West Side Tenants Conference held at the Fordham University School of Law, it was almost possible to imagine that she was not the Speaker of the City Council giving a keynote speech. Her soft green sweater pulled up to each elbow, her hair loose around her face as usual, she could have easily been mistaken as a tenant organizer like Ivette Nunez, the slender twenty-something young woman from Housing Conservation Coordinators (HCC) sitting at the panelists table beside her.

As she began, Quinn joked, “Usually I have to explain every single thing. But here—you know what all the acronyms mean,” referring to terms such as DHCR (Department of Housing Construction and Rehabilitation), HPD (Department of Housing Preservation and Development) and HDA (New York State Housing Finance Agency). Quinn learned those acronyms in the 1980s, when she was an organizer for the Association for Neighborhood Housing Development (ANHD), a co-sponsor of Saturday’s conference. As the Village Voice reported two years ago, Quinn first went to City Hall for ANHD, “buttonholing every councilmember (alas) could and keeping score every time a well-heeled real estate lobbyist walked in and out of the inner sanctum of them me city leader Peter Vallone.”

Now herself a target of those lobbyists, Quinn spoke frankly on Saturday about what tenants needed to do.

Quinn started with some good news about one of those acronyms, noting that her office had “tried to focus on making sure the P in HPD wasn’t just a letter, but was a mission and a program for the future.” She also hailed the July passage of the Safe Housing Act, which “constitutes a historic overhaul of the city’s [building code] enforcement system.”

The Safe Housing Act, which enacted the first modernization of the City Building Code since 1968, was accompanied by a

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A comprehensive enforcement plan expected to raise the bar for construction standards in New York City. “Now, every year, 300 of the known worst buildings in New York will get a head-to-toe inspection,” said Quinn. “And they can’t just say ‘there’s a hole in the ceiling’—which is all they’re required to do now. They have to find out why the hole is there, and write that up. We then present the list to the landlord, and tell him ‘you’ve fixed this, we will—and we’ll charge you.’” In addition, she said, the Act “greatly strengthens the city’s ability to take landlords to court.” The Rent Stabilization Association (which Quinn called the ‘building owners’ lobby’) was actually supportive of that bill, said Quinn. “They made many helpful suggestions.”

Such support has not been forthcoming, she added, as the new legislation moves forward. The Comprehensive Tenant Harassment Bill, which Quinn introduced on Wednesday along with City Councilmembers Melissa Mark-Viverito and Dan Garodnick, is designed to fill the legal gap. “If your landlord is harassing you, getting serviçover and even—probably because he wants you out of the building—it is not actionable right now,” said Quinn. “This bill will make such offenses actionable, so you can take your landlord to court.” The new civil violation would carry potential penalties of up to $50,000 per offense, harassment could also be monitored by tenants during eviction proceedings.

Despite the bill’s 19 co-sponsors and broad support, Quinn warned that opposition is already beginning to mount. “We’ve begun to hear from colleagues about this, selling. ‘Do we have to do this right now?’” Really have to? I got a call, ‘and so on.’ If the Council starts to come under more pressure from building owners and their allies, she added, “we may need to come back to the people in this room, to send a tenant message to City Hall.”

Quinn ended by saying that without the assembled tenant groups, the legislation thus far would be insufficient. “We couldn’t get the attention of our colleagues if you weren’t out there being active and organized. You’re part of the political infrastructure in this city,” she said.

The conference’s 300,000 attendees spent much of the rest of the day in workshops with titles like “How to Find Affordable Housing” and “Your Landlord Can’t Evict You!” They also shared strategies in sessions like “The Making of a Tenant Movement.”

For the session entitled “Illegal Hotels Upgrade,” about 30 tenants filled into a classroom to learn more about the notorious practice in which building owners advertise and rent residential units to non-intents. They learned from parallel and City Councilmembers Gale Brewer and Dan Garodnick, including the following:

- “We asked our district managers in the main office: ‘What is the law? And the answer came back: it’s not clear!’”
- “What shocked us was how little there was in law that defined this as illegal.”
- Brewer and fellow publicist and Manhattan Co-Assemblymember Richard Gottfried went on to talk about bills they were sponsoring to correct the situation. Brewer by increasing fines, Gottfried’s by tightening loopholes in state laws on rental and on-op concession—both much of the session was devoted to inquiring questions by tenants who proposed or knew that their building was in fact an illegal hotel.

Christina Davis Warren lives at 455 W. 34th St., a building that Signature Properties has taken to advertising as a “luxury building” but which contains a fair number of rent-stabilized tenants. “Tenants rent there for less than a week,” he said. “Meanwhile the landlord is doing everything they can to get us out as tenants.”

“For my illegal efforts, I have a lawsuit—on Craigslist, said Ruffin-Richardson. Other suggestions included searching for your address on Google or the notorious Weego.com, and checking the Website of several established companies known for such rentals, such as Signature Properties and Furnished Quarters.

Panelists and participants also lashed out against the process: “I live in a Weego building, which is mostly renting to students from Central and South America,” said another tenant at the back of the room. “I think the tenants are act like I’m in a prison—sued others.”

Manhattan Borough President Scott Stringer addresses the crowd at the Third Annual West Side Tenants Conference at Fordham University School of Law on Saturday.

Vivian Ruffin-Richardson of the West Side Neighborhood Alliance Inc. and State Assemblymember Richard Gottfried run a panel discussion during the Illegal Hotels Workshop at Saturday’s West Side Tenants Conference.

[Image]: Quinn keynote energizes busy tenants’ conference - Chelsea

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