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City Limits WEEKLY
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ROCKY ROAD FOR QUEENS TENANTS: LOW-RENT LANDLORDS SEEK TO EVICT

Single room occupancy hotel tenants in the Rockaways fight to hold onto their homes. >
By Gabriel Thompson

Just a short walk from the shoreline, a housing battle is brewing between residents of single room occupancy (SRO) hotels and their landlords in a section of Rockaway Beach, Queens. Within the past month, one building on Beach 96th Street has been emptied completely and another has lost nearly half its tenants.

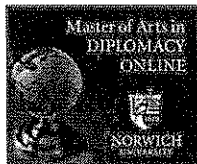
Ryan Napoli, an attorney at MFY Legal Services, has worked with the tenants at both buildings. "Owners are looking to sell, and they want to empty their buildings out so that they'll get more money," he said. "And they will do whatever it takes to get people out."

Now vacant, 167 Beach 96th Street had been occupied as a SRO for at least 16 years, though it was registered with the Department of Buildings (DOB) as a three-unit house. The tenants, most of who were low-income and some of whom had lived in the building for more than a decade, received a letter from the landlord's attorney on December 1 stating that the building had been sold and that they would have to leave within ten days. When the tenants balked, Napoli said, they were told by the landlord that the Police Department would be taking over the building, and they had to vacate immediately. The tenants, now working with Napoli, refused to budge.

Then, on March 1, an unidentified caller complained to the DOB that the building was an illegal SRO. On April 4, DOB inspected the building and issued a "vacate order," stating that the building would be sealed by the end of the day because there was only one means of egress and the law requires at least two. Napoli immediately called the department and convinced it to make the order applicable only to the several tenants on the third floor, since tenants on the first two floors only need one means of exit. But by the end of the day, the building's roughly dozen residents had already fled.

Pete Jacob, who told City Limits that he purchased the building two weeks ago, said that he wanted it vacant, and that he plans to knock it down and build new housing, which will not include SRO units. "I don't know anything about the building,

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except that I have it sealed up now and am getting ready to demolish.”

The conversion of SROs is a citywide problem. According to the West Side SRO Law Project, the number of SRO rooms has dropped to less than 40,000—from at least 120,000 in 1960—as buildings have been either razed or converted into traditional apartments. In the Rockaways, the housing has been under threat for years. Not only do landlords often seek to convert them to private houses, but Rockaway homeowners also have led campaigns to have them demolished (see [The Last Resort](#)).

The Department of Buildings' quick action to vacate 167 Beach 96th Street comes in sharp contrast to the frustratingly slow response that Napoli has seen at 189 Beach 96th Street, where the tenants themselves sought help from city agencies.

On July 25, 2005, all tenants of the legal 17-unit SRO building received notices of termination from their landlord, stating that they must leave their apartments by August 31 or face eviction. But tenants of legal SRO buildings with six or more units are rent-stabilized, with protections against large rent increases and eviction.

After Napoli sent a letter contesting the claims to the attorneys representing Patricia Catanzaro, the owner, she dropped the case. However, after visiting the building and speaking with tenants, Napoli discovered that there were numerous code violations, including rodent and roach infestations, mold and leaks.

In September, he filed a "Housing Part" (HP) case, a building-wide demand for repairs, and in December, the landlord signed an agreement to fix the violations. To date, 81 violations still persist, including a leaky roof and vermin. One of the tenants, an elderly woman on the first floor, was recently hospitalized with pneumonia. When she recovered and returned to her apartment, a home attendant found mold and leaks in her room and insisted that she transfer to a nursing home out of fear for her health.

Napoli has filed a motion for contempt that will be heard by a housing court judge on April 28, seeking damages and potential jail time for Catanzaro, who did not respond to messages left on her phone. Tenant Nina Quiñones said she and other residents have been urged to move out. "The super tells me over and over again that they're tearing down the house," she said. "Many of the tenants have given up and moved."

Quiñones, however, is planning on remaining, despite the rodent infestation. "It's gotten so bad now, the rats are even eating the dog food I put out."

—[Gabriel Thompson](#)