

## N.J. leaders clash over bill that would decrease municipal oversight of apartment buildings

**TRENTON** — Landlords across New Jersey would reap significant financial savings and face much less scrutiny under a bill that would take municipalities out the business of inspecting apartment buildings.

Supporters of the measure say it would eliminate redundancies and unnecessary costs, but municipal leaders contend that halting local inspections would provide a giveaway to landlords who wield influence in Trenton and leave tenants vulnerable to substandard conditions.

“This is a life-and-death issue,” said Bill Bray, spokesman for the city of New Brunswick, which inspects its 12,000 rental units once every three years. “Having inspectors on the ground abating issues has saved lives.”

Currently, the state inspects all apartment buildings with three or more units once every five years, and requires owners to register with the Department of Community Affairs.

In addition, many cities like New Brunswick have established their own inspection programs by assessing landlords to help pay for inspectors and increased oversight. City officials say the added vigilance is crucial to scrutinize absentee landlords and troublesome properties, which are often found in urban areas and can detract from the quality of life.

The bill, which was approved by the state Senate and is expected to be taken up by the Assembly in the fall, would prevent municipalities from conducting routine inspections or charge for them, something that would become the sole domain of the state.

“It’s redundant,” said state Senator Jeff Van Drew (D-Cape May), a sponsor of the bill. “It adds another layer of bureaucracy that is not efficient and actually raises rents.”

Van Drew said municipalities would still be able to respond to complaints, oversee construction projects, inspect apartments when there is a change in occupancy and conduct annual fire inspections.

The changes would also provide significant savings for landlords.

The state assesses a one-time registration fee of \$10, while municipal registration fees are often assessed annually and range from \$15 to \$500 for each building and may include a separate bill for each unit.

For inspections, the state charges landlords on a sliding scale ranging from about \$20 to a little more than \$50 depending on the apartments a landlord owns.

By comparison, local inspection fees range from \$50 to \$100 for each unit.

"We believe local municipalities are using it to raise revenue," said Conor Fennessy, vice president of governmental affairs at the New Jersey Apartment Association, which has lobbied feverishly for the bill.

Fennessy said his organization wants to eliminate government redundancy while retaining a system that is fair to landlords and tenants.

Since last year, his organization has contributed more than \$120,000 to the campaigns of important legislators and state party committees, according to reports filed with the New Jersey Election Law Commission.

Of the \$120,000, the organization contributed \$61,400 to the state committees, with the majority of the money going to Democrats who control the Legislature. It sent the other \$59,005 to individual candidates, with the sponsors of the bill, including Van Drew, receiving the largest amounts.

"The association makes contributions when solicited, and only to candidates who share our belief that providing safe, clean and affordable housing is critical to our state's economy and overall quality of life," Fennessy said.

City officials said supporters of the bill are ignoring the unique needs of cities and the importance of more robust inspections.

"This legislation will almost certainly guarantee that people will live in substandard housing," said Mayor Eldridge Hawkins of Orange, a leading opponent of the bill.

He said many of the state's urban areas are seeing an influx of immigrants and minority members who are often wary of reporting landlords for fear of retribution. He said the only way to identify these problems and to hold landlords accountable for poor conditions is through stepped-up local inspections.

"They don't want to have the exposure or the costs associated with having the city come in there," he said.

By **Jarrett Renshaw** and **Megan DeMarco**/Statehouse Bureau Staff