

Mayor opposes bill to ease apartment checks

Legislation in Senate would make local annual inspections a once-every-five year state task

**By Chris Sykes
Staff Writer**

Mayor Eldridge Hawkins Jr. said the city plans to protect renters by taking on what he called the “slumlord protection” legislation making its way through the state Legislature.

Hawkins said last week he is opposed a bill that amends the state’s Hotel and Multiple Dwelling Law enacted in 1967. The law gave municipalities the option of annual inspections because, the belief was at the time, urban tenants were often victimized by “slumlords” who often had no intention of maintaining their buildings.

Another concern was that there were inexperienced or undercapitalized property owners who lacked the funds or knowledge to provide upkeep as mandated by state law.

Proponents of the new bill say that under the 1967 law, the state inspects apartments once every five years. That overlap with municipal inspections, plus the fees landlords may be required to pay a municipality for apartment registration and inspection, is the reason for the push to drop the annual local checks.

Hawkins said if the bill becomes law, it would protect bad landlords and make it easier for them to allow unsafe and unsanitary conditions in their buildings. The Senate Community and Urban Affairs Committee has approved the proposal and sent it to the full Senate.

Hawkins said he, his “fellow urban mayors” and the New Jersey State League of Municipalities have been urging legislators

to vote against the measure.

“Our annual inspections protect tenants by assuring all rental properties are maintained in safe and sanitary conditions,” Hawkins said. “In this recession, we have a growing problem of foreclosures, which leads directly to lack of maintenance. We also have a growing immigrant population reluctant to report unsafe and unsanitary conditions to municipal authorities.”

Hawkins said the issue raised by the bill is not new. He said American cities have set standards for the construction and maintenance of multiple dwellings for more than a century. Hawkins stressed that while most landlords maintain their buildings, “bad” landlords are concentrated in cities, especially in the poorest neighborhoods.

“Eliminating annual inspections would be harmful to urban renters at any time, but it is a particularly bad idea in a national financial crisis when housing deterioration is on the rise,” said Hawkins. “While renters always have the ability to contact local or state housing officials to complain about dangerous conditions, those who are elderly, disabled, uneducated, low income, or have difficulty speaking English often do not speak up.”

The reason tenants often do not complain is fear, said Hawkins said.

“They fear retaliation or eviction,” Hawkins said. “Many are unaware of their rights or don’t even know who to contact with a complaint.”

Managing Editor John Zucal contributed to this article.