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Apartment safety standards / Keep local inspections

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New Jersey is about to make its rental units less safe.

That will be the result of a bill approved recently by the state Senate and headed to the Assembly. The bill, sponsored by state Sen. Jeff Van Drew, D-Cape May, Cumberland, would prohibit local municipalities from carrying out routine periodic inspections of apartment buildings.

The measure is being promoted as a way to eliminate unnecessary costs for landlords. What it actually does is endanger the safety of our most vulnerable citizens. The poorest members of society, those who have no choice but to live in the cheapest buildings - which are also the oldest and most dangerous - will be most affected by this.

Proponents of the bill say they are merely eliminating duplication and that state inspections of apartment buildings are adequate to ensure safety.

But local officials have a better idea of the condition of their housing inventory than the state possibly can. They are more likely to be aware of a building's history and its problems. And municipalities are far more likely than the state to conduct inspections in a timely manner.

Robust inspections are an effective tool for helping to maintain the quality of housing stock in cities and for holding absentee landlords accountable for the condition of their buildings.

In 1990, a family of five died of carbon monoxide poisoning in an Atlantic City apartment building. The poisonous gas entered the family's apartment because a water heater had been improperly installed with a defective flue in violation of the building code.

The defect wasn't caught in any state inspection of the apartments.

A trial revealed that an owner of the apartments had bribed a local inspector several times to overlook the problem. Tragedies like this would be more likely to occur under this legislation, which no matter how you feel about it, obviously would result in fewer

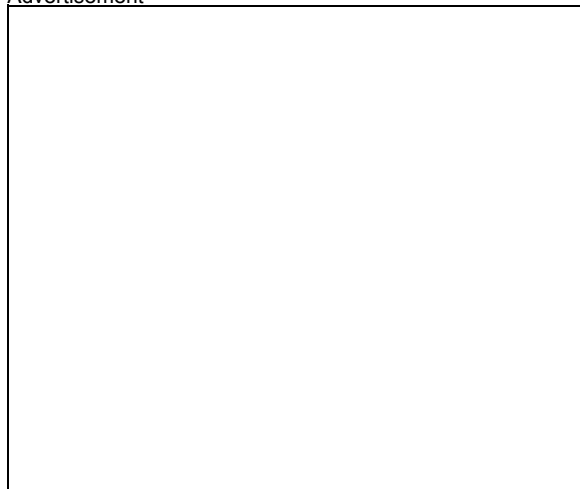
inspections.

The New Jersey Apartment Association, a landlords' group that is pushing this bill, says some cities are using the inspection fees to generate revenues, rather than ensure safety. If that's the case, it might make more sense to impose limits on what municipalities can charge for inspections, but it makes no sense to eliminate those inspections.

Mayor Eldridge Hawkins of Orange was right when he told The Star-Ledger, "This legislation will almost certainly guarantee that people will live in substandard housing."

Local inspections of apartment buildings are necessary. This bill is not - and it's dangerous.

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Herald News: Local housing oversight essential

TUESDAY, JULY 19, 2011

HERALD NEWS

WHEN IT comes to housing, and often densely populated apartment housing in northern New Jersey, one size does not fit all. That is our chief concern with legislation sponsored by Sen. Jeff Van Drew, D-Cape May, a bill that has cleared the state Senate and may come up for a vote later this year in the Assembly.

The bill seeks to realign enforcement responsibility of state code "concerning multiple dwellings," from municipalities to the state. As drafted, the bill would be a two-for-one boon for landlords in New Jersey. It would not only allow them to reap significant financial savings, but let them do so while facing much less scrutiny from inspectors.

Van Drew describes the current model, where state and sometimes city inspectors review apartment buildings, as "redundant."

His legislation would prevent municipalities from conducting routine inspections or charge for them. The measure would still allow cities to respond to complaints, oversee construction projects and to inspect apartments when there is a change of occupancy. It will also allow cities to continue to conduct fire inspections.

We will admit that sometimes inspections done by municipal code inspectors have left much to be desired. We have seen more than once code violations overlooked by inspectors who might have a cozy relationship with a landlord or tenant.

That doesn't mean the whole system is corrupt, or that we should be taking lightly the plight of tenants in densely populated cities across the state, particularly here in North Jersey, where aging housing stock is prevalent and potential for abuse by absentee landlords is high.

Certainly, taking the inspections out of municipalities' hands will mean fewer revenues for city coffers and according to the non-partisan Office of Legislative Services, a potential reduction in certain costs as well.

Currently, 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. As for inspections, the state inspects all apartment buildings every five years, charging a sliding scale from \$20 to \$50. Local inspection fees can range from \$50 to \$100 per unit.

All things being considered, we are less concerned with how much money is being spent on actual inspections than we are with making sure those inspections are followed to the tee. From what we can tell, this legislation would bring fewer housing inspections overall. In our state's urban centers, that's just not acceptable.

Every apartment or multiple-housing dweller in New Jersey should be able to live in clean and adequate housing, housing that is not overcrowded and that meets basic fire safety code.

We are unconvinced this bill would continue the oversight and inspection that is needed for multiple-dwelling housing, and urge the Assembly to reject it.

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