

# STATE LEGISLATORS SPLIT ON APARTMENT INSPECTIONS

BY WALTER ELLIOTT

**ORANGE** : Mayor Eldridge Hawkins, Jr. has been campaigning on the public and municipal levels the last four months against a State House-proposed change in apartment inspection authority which may come to a final vote in Trenton after Nov. 8.

Hawkins has more than lent his name and office in opposing S-2795, which would move the authority of inspecting hotels and multiple unit housing from the municipalities to the state. The bill, sponsored by State Sen. Jeff Van Drew (D-Cape May Court House) was sent to the General Assembly after Van Drew's colleagues passed it 23-13-4 June 29.

The mayor has appeared in a New Jersey State League of Municipalities video clip decrying the proposed bill. Hawkins is chairman of the league's management reform committee.

Hawkins has recently debated the proposed bill on My9 News with proponent Conor Fennessy of the N.J. Apartment Association. The 25-year-old NJAA, of Monroe Township, represents multiple dwelling owners and landlords.

The mayor has written a one-page letter on City of Orange Township stationery June 8, explaining his opposition.

"S-2795 would eliminate the

present ability of cities to conduct annual housing inspections that protect tenants from unsafe and unsanitary conditions," said Hawkins in his letter. "Under existing law the state inspects apartments only once every five years. Cities have the option to conduct annual inspections and to require apartment house owners to register their apartments."

Hawkins asserts that bad landlords tend to operate in poor or urban districts, where tenants are reluctant to speak out about dwelling conditions. The mayor calls the proposed bill "slumlord protection."

NJAA's Fennessy, however, views S-2795 and companion bill A-3835 as a streamlining of state and local inspections. Fennessy, as vice president of governmental affairs, cited the growth of the 1967 Hotel and Multiple Dwelling Act "from a few pages to 90" for the simplification.

"As a result, New Jersey has the MOST comprehensive and stringent state-imposed standards in the nation and the (state) Department of Community Affairs' 74-point all-encompassing inspection protocol exceeds anything conducted by other states," said Fennessy at njaa.com. "S-2795 clarifies state law to restore common-sense and balance

to a comprehensive system that has served renters and the public well."

At issue is the current option for municipalities to hold separate inspections and enforcement. S-2795, as sponsored by Van Drew and Sen. Steve Oroho (R-Sparta) would eliminate the municipal inspection level in favor of DCA-led inspection.

The June 29 vote resulted in a split among the "Local Talk" legislators.

Sens. Thomas Kean, Jr., M. Teresa Ruiz, Kevin O'Toole and Ronald L. Rice voted with the 23-member majority. Sens. Richard J. Codey, Nia Gill and Paul Sarlo were among the 13 dissenters. Four senators did not vote.

The measure now rests with the Assembly's Housing and Local Government Committee. Mila Jasey (D-South Orange) is the committee's vice chairwoman and Nutley colleague Kevin J. Ryan is a panelist. Jasey and Ryan had sponsored companion bill A-3835 before it was merged with S-2795.

Other Assembly committee members are: Chairman Jerry Green (D-Plainfield), Daniel Benson (R-Hamilton Square), Michael Patrick Carroll (R-Morrisstown), Celeste Riley (D-Bridgeton) and Charlotte Vandervalk (R-West Windsor).