

# DAILY NEWS

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NEW YORK'S HOMETOWN NEWSPAPER

Friday, February 22, 2002

## A low-cost fix for the housing crisis

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One of the victims of Mayor Bloomberg's struggle to close a \$4.8 billion budget gap is any major new investment in housing, even though the city faces an affordable housing crisis.

But there are low-cost — and even no-cost — ways of improving the quality and quantity of housing that could prove to be a Bloomberg legacy every bit as important as the lasting impression the outgoing mayor has left:

■ **Apply Compstat to the 170,000 units of public housing.** Bloomberg has reappointed the capable Housing Authority chairman, Tino Hernandez. And Hernandez has already begun to apply Compstat's method of intense, computer-driven studies of problems to the city's housing developments.

Now the mayor should use that information to make the upgrading of the Housing Authority's maintenance, security and repair systems a top priority. He should spend a night every few months in a different housing development. He should personally inspect complexes where we have had to press custodians to add soap to the filthy water they use to "clean" floors. Where hallways and stairwells haven't been painted in decades. Where criminals somehow end up with keys to lobby doors.

Public housing used to be clean, dignified, even elegant. Older residents remember the days when hallways sparkled and drapes graced lobbies. It can be that way again.

■ **Get the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development to improve its management of nearly 30,000 units in the city.** Some of the most deplorable developments in the city are owned and managed by HUD or have recently been transferred by HUD to disreputable "community groups." The mayor should visit the charred and drug-ridden halls of Noble Drew Ali Plaza and Mother Gaston, both in Brooklyn. Then he and his talented housing commissioner, Jerilyn Perine, should hammer out a plan with HUD to guarantee better stewardship of HUD's housing inventory in New York or the transfer of those developments — with the funds to upgrade and manage them — to the city.

■ **Crack down on private owners who refuse to renovate and rent vacant units.** Many privately owned housing complexes are in disrepair or are underused. A complex on Atlantic Ave. in Brooklyn has 100 vacant apartments and minimal services; the owner operates similar properties in other parts of Brooklyn and in Queens. Thousands of units remain unoccupied above first-floor commercial tenants along 138th St. in the Bronx and Lexington Ave. in East Harlem, among other locations. These vacant units — which re-

tard the revival of commercial and residential areas — are a valuable but unused source of new housing.

The mayor should send in teams of inspectors and fine the owners for every single health, safety and structural violation — a revenue generator for the city. Then give owners 90 days to start addressing conditions in their buildings. If they refuse, use the power of eminent domain to reclaim the properties and transfer them to people who will make them into decent housing again.

■ **Rebuild old, vacant commercial strips with housing.** All over the city, there are streets like Liberty and Pitkin in East New York, Brooklyn, that were once commercial strips but now are vacant. The Community Preservation Corp. has a four-story, eight-unit rental or condo prototype that could be developed on many of these sites. Three-story, two-family housing could also improve these sites. The city has scores of sites available for such construction. It should move quickly to return them to productive use.

These solutions don't depend on large commitments of city funds. They do depend on a mayoral commitment to existing public housing and an aggressive focus on the hidden inventories of mismanaged, underused or not-yet-built housing. *The Rev. Youngblood is chairman of East Brooklyn Congregations. The Rev. Gavigan is co-chairman of South Bronx Churches.*