Despite a demonstration on the steps of City Hall and apparent racial division among its members, the City Council excluded the revered and rebuked Sonny Carson from a street-naming bill at its stated meeting on May 30, turning a normally routine procedure into a controversy. The council also â€“ and much less contentiously â€“ adopted a bill to strengthen the repair process for the city's most dilapidated buildings and a measure requiring building owners to submit up-to-date floor numbering lists to the fire department.

Sonny Carson Avenue Goes No Where

The council rejected an amendment by Councilmember Albert Vann to commemorate Carson, a controversial black activist, on a four-block section of Gates Avenue in Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn. The vote was 25 to 15 with 7 abstentions. The bill, some council members said amid boos and hisses from the audience, represented a battle between the desire of one neighborhood to honor an activist versus reluctance by others to commemorate a man who many see as divisive.

"The issue is not just Sonny Carson," said Vann. "It's the community's prerogative."

Last month, the parks committee voted along racial lines to remove Carson's name from a street-naming bill (Intro 556). Throughout the street renaming debate, council members opposed to the designation have cited Carson's criminal record and anti-Semitic comments.

Inside the council chambers, where jeers reverberated from a packed mezzanine, Councilmember Charles Barron accused Council Speaker Christine Quinn, who opposed including Carson's name on the street-naming bill, of hampering a community-driven process. Exceeding his two-minute comment period, Barron said the speaker divided the governing body more than the late activist could ever split the city's communities.

One of many members who defended their votes, Quinn reiterated her stance opposing Carson's inclusion in the street-naming bill, contending any recipient of a city honor should be a uniting figure, not a dividing one.

"I think it is incredibly important that when we rename streets in the City of New York, when we give somebody a higher governmental honorâ€¦. that when we do that we make sure those individuals who we honor are people that sought to bring our five boroughs together," Quinn said in a press conference prior to the council vote. "I don't think Sonny Carson embodies those core values."

Normally, the street-naming process is kicked off by a recommendation from a local community board. It is then brought before the council by an individual member, approved by the parks committee and formally endorsed by the council in one of two package street renaming bills submitted every year. Vann's amendment at the stated council meeting was a last-ditch attempt to reincorporate Carson's name on the package bill.

Following the amendment's rejection, the council approved the remaining 51 honorary designations, which included the likes of modern dancer Alvin Ailey and 1920s state Senator Mark W. Allen, by a vote of 40 to 4 with 3 abstentions.

Housing Repairs

In an attempt to rid the city of habitual housing code violators, the City Council unanimously approved the Safe Housing Act â€“ a bill aimed at New York's most dilapidated buildings.

Currently, improvements to buildings are done primarily on a quick-fix basis through the city's Emergency Repair Program, which often addresses rat and other vermin infestations, a lack of heat and hot water and broken front doors. Although the current program attempts to fix the most hazardous problems as quickly as possible, it leaves many of the more complicated and repetitive improvements simmering.

Going beyond the emergency repairs now conducted by the city, the Safe Housing Act (Intro 561) would single out 200 distressed buildings a year and require the completion of long-term improvements. An owner notified by the Department of Housing Preservation and Development has four months to fix all heat and hot water violations as well as 80 percent of all hazardous and immediately hazardous violations.

Introduced by Quinn and Councilmember Letitia James, the bill requires that the owner of the distressed building fund all of the mandated repairs and pay any outstanding fees from the

previous repair program.

The year following a building's inclusion in the safe housing program, the housing department will monitor its compliance â€“ at least every three months â€“ and require the building manager or owner to participate in a building management-training course.

Buildings selected for the program â€“ estimated by the housing department to cost $10.1 million in its first year - must have a history of housing code violations. If owners do not cooperate with the program, the city will conduct top-to-bottom repair work through a contractor and subsequently send the owner a bill . If the owner continues to be uncooperative, the city could eventually take over the building, Quinn said.

"The goal of this bill was to come up with a piece of legislation that could take significant steps forward to preserve affordable housing in our city, and to take the worst buildings in the City of New York and make them highly livable buildings, and to hold bad landlords accountable," Quinn said in the press conference prior to the council meeting. "I hope the message this bill sends is that if you are a slumlord, your days are numbered in the City of New York."

The bill, James said, should target the city's worst offenders and support populations who often suffer from poor housing conditions, including communities of color, immigrants and seniors.

Strengthening Fire Safety: Round Two

In conjunction with legislation signed by Mayor Michael Bloomberg this week, the City Council approved a bill (Intro 496) requiring buildings over 150 feet provide lists of floor numbers lists to the fire department if the floors do not comply with standard numbering

When Yankee pitcher Cory Lidle’s plane crashed into a high-rise last year, first responders were faced with non-standard floor numbering â€“ when one floor does not correspond with its actual story, such as one level being titled the 25th floor when it is really the 24th . This labeling can affect the fire department's ability to address a disaster or emergency quickly, council members said.

Introduced by Councilmember Gale Brewer, the bill attempts to address a growing trend to give floors a higher number than their actual story in order to increase the apartments' market appeal and value. The fire commissioner will develop rules outlining the filing procedure, which will be conducted electronically.

Citing "the deplorable lack of information available to New York City's firefighters," Brewer said, "the inability for the fire department to quickly retrieve accurate building information wastes precious initial response time and is life threatening for our first responders and those in need."

The bill follows legislation approved earlier in May (Intro 553) by the council that requires that the building department notify the fire department when it issues permits for substantial renovations â€“changes that could also affect the fire department's response time.

Brooklyn's Business Improvement District

The City Council also approved a Business Improvement District (Intro 555) for Court-Livingston-Schermerhorn â€“ a vibrant commercial site in downtown Brooklyn. The area comprises 314 properties and is valued at nearly $357 million.

The district, introduced at the request of the mayor, will make way for the collection of a special tax to improve the area, according to a committee report . The extra funding, set at $765,000 for the first year, will go primarily toward cleanup to retain a strong local business presence, a spokesman for downtown Brooklyn Councilmember David Yassky said.

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