

In his 2006 State of the City address, Mayor Michael Bloomberg made it clear that housing is a priority for his second term. He said he would emphasize affordability. As rents continue to rise across the city and statistics show people are spending more of their income on rent, this is certainly something most New Yorkers want to hear.

“New York’s future depends on our ability to make sure that middle and working class families can afford to live here,” Bloomberg said. “That’s why we fought for the \$400 property tax rebate. It’s why I will be asking the State Legislature to extend the rebates for the remainder of my term. And it’s why we are creating the most ambitious affordable housing initiative in New York City history.”

The mayor was referring to his \$400 property tax rebate to homeowners and his \$7.5 billion plan to build and preserve 165,000 apartments that middle-income and low-income people can afford.

THE MAYOR'S HOUSING INITIATIVES

The mayor has other initiatives in housing that he can point to as proof that he takes housing seriously. During his campaign last year, hardly a day went by when the mayor did not announce some new effort to address a problem in housing. Housing groups had been aggressively pushing many of those initiatives long before the mayor got around to them.

Some advocates say city officials have responded to their proposals and acted effectively and they look forward to more of the same during his second term.

In an email, a spokesperson for the city said, “The Bloomberg Administration is always glad to hear and discuss housing concerns and policy with advocates, tenants, and residential owners. We have a very positive and ongoing dialog with housing advocates. While we may not agree with all their proposals, and views also differ among the advocacy organizations, we all share a goal of building and preserving more affordable housing in New York City.” A member of a landlords lobby group told me that his group had noticed the city’s discussions with advocates. He raised an eyebrow.

Targeted Code Enforcement

A good recent example of that dialog is probably the Targeted Code Enforcement Program (TCEP). About a year ago, advocates led by the [Association for Neighborhood Housing and Development](#) brokered a deal with city housing officials that provides comprehensive inspections of problem buildings. That deal itself stemmed from a council bill.

“We’re seeing a lot of violations and we’re seeing landlords wanting to repair their buildings as a result of being targeted by council members and community groups,” said David Greenberg of the Association for Neighborhood Housing and Development. “And for landlords immune to that kind of pressure the city is suing them.”

Housing Plan and Rent Subsidy Program

Marc Greenberg at the Interfaith Assembly on Homelessness and Housing said the code enforcement initiative was one of a number that show “good faith.” He also cited the mayor’s New Housing Market plan and his rent subsidy program called [Housing Stability Plus](#) , despite its problems, as evidence of concern and attention to housing and homelessness.

“I think in each of these cases there has been a good faith gesture and now it’s up to advocates to work with the administration to come up with the rest,” he said. “There’s clearly an openness to continue the dialogue.

“Frankly, this is the way government should be. It should work in partnership with the non-profit sector. Now we have to hold up our end of the relationship.”

WHAT THE MAYOR ISN'T TALKING ABOUT Loss Of Stabilized and Subsidized Apartments

Other advocates, however, are not nearly as optimistic. The main reason is that the city’s largest stock of affordable housing — rent stabilized apartments — is evaporating. And the mayor is doing virtually nothing about it.

“He’s totally ignoring it,” said Michael McKee, of Tenants Political Action Committee. “It doesn’t

make any sense. Maybe he hasn't thought it through."

Section 8

And the problem is compounded by the loss of subsidized housing, too, McKee said. Many people are waiting anxiously to see what the courts say about whether a landlord must continue to accept the federal Section 8 rent subsidy from a tenant in a rent stabilized apartment.

In those apartments, leases automatically renew, ostensibly under the same terms and conditions as the original lease. So, if a landlord accepted Section 8 from the outset, tenant lawyers have argued, they should have to continue accepting it. But changes in federal law, landlord attorneys argue, make it clear that landlords should not have to continue accepting Section 8 when a lease renews.

Courts have ruled both ways and a ruling on the issue is expected any day now from the appellate court that oversees Brooklyn, Queens and Staten Island.

A member of a landlord lobby group said his organization is awaiting the higher court decision on this issue with great expectations. He said landlords oppose renewing Section 8 because the bureaucratic problems landlords experience dealing with Section 8 are a nightmare. That is a real problem with Section 8 — even advocates call it the program they "love to hate."

But it is not hard to see that if landlords do not have to renew Section 8 leases, they will effectively force thousands of people to move: No one receiving Section 8 could afford to stay in the apartment — they would face a huge rent increase, hundreds of dollars. And they would, of course, lose their Section 8 if they chose to stay in the apartment. In the city, Section 8 has a waiting list that has been closed for more than a decade. And it is important to bear in mind that when people vacate rent stabilized apartments, the landlord can raise the rent substantially for a new tenant — and decontrol it if the rent hits \$2,000 or greater.

McKee said a court ruling in favor of landlords would be a disaster for low-income tenants who receive Section 8.

“If the courts rule in favor of landlords, a lot of people are going to get evicted,” he said. “We’re all holding our breaths to see what happens.”

Loss Of Mitchell-Lama

The mayor has turned a deaf ear, too, to other subsidized housing programs that are being lost. In the last few years, as many as half of the 80,000 or Mitchell-Lama rentals in the city have gone or are in the process of becoming market-rate apartments. The state Mitchell-Lama program, which helped developers build apartments through tax rebates and other incentives, allows landlords to buy out of the program after a set period — 20 years, for example. Many are doing so.

Lack Of Home Rule

One change in state law would allow the city to effectively address both of these issues: Giving the city [home rule on rent regulation laws](#) . Changing the state law would allow the city to write its own laws on housing, stricter than those proposed by state legislators. Bloomberg supported home rule once, then changed his mind. Again, advocates are mystified.

“This is the first mayor who doesn’t owe anything at all to the real estate lobby,” McKee said. “He’s not beholden to them at all. I am just speculating, but I think the problem is that, in his world view, rent regulation is not a good thing.

“When Bloomberg wanted control of the schools, he talked about it every day and he proved all the pundits wrong. He should make the same effort on home rule.” But, McKee said, Bloomberg seems uninterested in discussing that or other issues related to rent regulation.

Legal Services and Neighborhood Stabilization

Some advocates criticize the mayor for what they see as his neglect of effective programs to help the homeless.

State Of The City Housing

by {ga=jlamport}

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“If Bloomberg really is serious about homelessness prevention why does he continue to de-fund legal service programs and neighborhood stabilization programs?” said Larry Wood, organizer at Goddard Riverside Community Center in Manhattan (and a member of the board of directors of the organization for which I work.) He was referring to the annual budget negotiations between City Council and the mayor’s office, when the mayor’s budget zeroes out funding of legal services, which he calls a "mindless dance."

“Homelessness prevention programs -- both preserving the tenancies and preserving those units that become deregulated â€”- are cost effective and keep people out of the shelter system and from becoming a much bigger burden for the city,” said Wood.

So, while Bloomberg has impressed some with his commitments to solving housing problems, he has a long way to go to convince others.

Joe Lamport is the assistant director of the [City-Wide Task Force on Housing Court](#) , a coalition of community housing organizations. Â