

Testimony regarding Intro 523
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To the Honorable: Speaker Gifford Miller, Housing and Buildings Committee Chair Madeline Provenzano, City Council Members and distinguished guests.

I am Diane Lapson; I serve as a Vice President of the IPN Tenant Association (IPNTA). At IPN, we have 1,340 apartments in three 39 floor towers and adjoining low-rises. Most tenants moved to IPN in the early '70,s.

I would like to give a shortened version of what could be at least twenty pages of why I believe this legislation is an honorable change to the Mitchell Lama regulations.

I will use Independence Plaza North as an example of a Mitchell Lama development. In the '70's, when two of the three buildings were still empty, brochures were given out by management describing what life at IPN would be like. (Copies can be submitted.) Brochures showed a beautiful neighborhood with planted walkways, a skating rink, a pool, shops and social activities. We were shown a drawing of a sky-bridge walkway to the future Independence Plaza South. It was shown as a new fabulous city! The text advertised that we could live in historic "Olde New York," in affordable luxury housing. The brochures showed photos of our then "manager" serving brunch to senior citizens and having welcoming parties. There was a greeting by a leader in the printing business and a message from local politicians about the history and rebuilding of Washington Market. When the renters did not come, 236 vouchers were added to attract tenants. Although rent monies did arrive, the promises did not. The pool was closed within a few years of the buildings becoming full (in spite of tenants paying membership for what was to be a free pool.)

Needless to say, the walkways, skating rink, and planted gardens weren't built. Neither was the shopping. In reality, I moved into IPN in 1975, but it was not until 1982 that our supermarket, The Food Emporium was opened. It was opened because the tenants stood in the streets collecting thousands of signatures to ask government assistance in forcing the high rental rates of IPN's commercial spaces DOWN. The Tenant Association also helped the supermarket by applying for a UDAG loan so they could renovate. For eight years, tenants at IPN had to travel at least a mile and a half to do grocery shopping. The only commercial space rented was to a doctor, a few years after the complex opened. We did not have a drug store, a convenience shop, a coffee shop, a drycleaner or any other commercial venues available to us. There was nothing but us and empty warehouses.

IPN was surrounded by broken cobblestone streets, empty lots, buildings that were either abandoned years before, or run down factories. This was not the atmosphere promised to IPN tenants. The tenants themselves had to fight to get the city to pave the streets. With our growing population of children, the tenants of IPN had to fight to expand our little annex school into P.S. 234, now labeled one of the (if not the) best public schools in New York City. Neither the landlord nor the management company ever ONCE participated in improving our desolate neighborhood. Nor did they dispel the myth that we were a 9-5 neighborhood, according to the First Precinct and city agencies. They provided only the apartments we lived in. A big empty, weed and rodent filled lot bordered 310 Greenwich Street. It was the tenants themselves who turned a junkyard into a community garden. Then, after almost the same 8 years it took to get a supermarket and paved streets, IPN tenants fought for and won Washington Market Park, and in fact, tenants started the park board and served to make sure it was all it could be. Funding for the school, park, etc. came directly from the tenants efforts.

As tenants pushed and worked with the city for other commercial spaces, paved streets, traffic lights, additional street lighting and finally the park. our area became more attractive to the people who once wouldn't even come to visit us "down there." (Family and friends used to refer to living in Tribeca as "down in the boondocks." Most wouldn't dare come at night to the dark abandoned streets. The area known as Washington Market was changed to "Tribeca." And suddenly, we were on the map. It WAS NOT THE OWNERS WHO PUT US ON THE MAP. I would have thought that they, like so many other owners of Mitchell Lama developments, would get beyond the goal of just filling up their empty apartments. However, you can hear this story from each development. When Mr. Laurence Gluck was awaiting approval from HPD to buy IPN, he requested a meeting with the board members. Even he told us at that first meeting, that we were sent to "gentrify the neighborhood."

It seems quite inequitable, to say the least, that we were "sent to gentrify the neighborhood." and obviously did quite a job; Yet the owners who did nothing to improve the neighborhood except to put obstacles in our way, and an outside purchaser become the two entities that greatly profit off the work of the tenants. Are we Mitchell Lama residents considered worker ants, sent in advance to create the future windfall of real estate investors? Does the very government who subsidized 95 percent of the complex not recognize the inequity on behalf of their own tax paying citizens - their own middle, working class? If the government agencies, hearts are always hardened against the very people they were created to protect, what state of democracy are we in now? I'd say not a very good one.

Of course, the owner of a Mitchell Lama might respond that merely by allowing housing for thousands, they have contributed to "gentrifying" a neighborhood. This response is unacceptable. Slumlords have done this for years and the neighborhoods have deteriorated, not improved. And when a mere 5% constitutes ownership, it would behoove an owner not to have such an arrogant attitude to begin with. Where is the owner's, gratitude for having what they say we have, "a sweet deal?"

Legislation to help balance the inequity of such dealings seems not only in order, but a crime not to advance. As the rules stand now, the reward for spending over 20 years (in IPN's case about 30) as involved residents who have built an amazing community, is this: A buy out notice giving us warning that our community will sooner than later come to an end... as if it's a party and that the party is over. The concept that Mitchell Lama residents received "a good deal for a long time, after all" is so twisted that I cannot even respond to it. What about the concept that Mitchell Lama landlords paid a relatively small investment over a long term mortgage with government incentives and in return, owed to their tenants a decent living environment?

The stories of Mitchell Lama residents are more accurately one of poor maintenance, limited security, little amenities, the use of 3-day eviction notices as memo paper for late rent payment. In the case of IPN tenants for much of it's existence, disrespect and condescending attitudes on behalf of the management office; lack of communication that required tenants to show up in court rather than having a civilized discussion in the management office, etc. We were treated like second class citizens and there are endless witnesses and experiences. How can we justify the disrespectful treatment of some very decent and respect worthy people? It was revolting to watch and hear about.

Regarding the statement, "It's not fair to change the rules in the middle of the game," may we remind the landlords that Mitchell Lama has been changed through legislation several times, mostly to the advantage of the landlord.

Mitchell Lama complexes offer not only affordable housing but also a chance for our society to create integrated communities that could set examples. A study by Columbia University students showed IPN to mirror the stats of NYC regarding ethnic and racial mixes. At IPN, not only have the tenants made it work, but neighbors of all races, religions and ethnic backgrounds live together as family. This is the truth without exaggeration and in fact I cannot overstate its significance for a healthier society at large. The saying, "Love thy Neighbor," is real for us.

The thousands of people at IPN and in other Mitchell Lama complexes believe that the time has come for legislation to give the builders of many neighborhoods in New York, the residents themselves, the respect they deserve and more negotiating power in a concept that was created to protect the middle class. This very concept has been allowed to back-fire into yet another way to make a killing in real estate on the backs of tens of thousands of American citizens. We believe it's time to turn the tide of history and hope sincerely that you, our City Council members will vote in favor of the existing intro # 523 on behalf of the people you represent. In the future, how will we live with ourselves knowing that one complex after another faded away while people were driven from New York? The kind of people who get involved. Is this any way to run a city?

In closing, I would like to also share that in February 2002 I was asked to represent Independence Plaza as our Tenant Association and residents were honored in Washington, D.C. by Johns Hopkins University's Seminar on Biodefense. The tenants' response and cooperation in taking care of everyone at IPN for the ten days following 9/11/01 was recognized as the example of an American Community at its best in the face of terror and disaster. The group listened in rapt attention as I described New Yorkers who had to find food especially for the seniors when all stores were shut down; who took care of the handicapped when all home care attendants were not allowed below Canal Street; how teenagers who were quite traumatized themselves helped bring food to the elderly; how people formed a human chain to empty a large truck full of donated food and equally distributed supplies to all three buildings.

They wept as I explained how one of our tenants who worked at the top of the Trade Center had just lost all of his co-workers, many friends and his job as he watched in horror as the Twin Towers came tumbling down. Yet, he was in the street volunteering to do whatever needed to be done to help his neighbors. Black, White, Asian, Christian, Muslim, Jew, and everything in-between working together because we are a tried and true community. A family. Additionally, IPN has created a preparedness booklet from our experience that is now being lauded all across the country. These are the types of people Mitchell Lama residences house. These are the kind of New Yorkers who build parks and schools. These are the very people our city should be protecting. As I stood in front of the countless heads of states' department of health officials, first responder groups, governors (including the Governor of Oklahoma), etc., I wondered how they would react to hearing about IPN's real threatened future.

Although this community was being congratulated, appreciated and honored for so admirably navigating a terrorist attack, a bigger threat to their homes was coming. The threat of the end of IPN's community family was not from the Taliban, but from within New York itself. Heartbreak and tears are not what is needed now. *We need strong legislation - and not a watered down bill.* Mitchell Lama tenants are being forced to lose their homes, their friends, their communities, and even the city and state they devoted their lives to living in. Now, we need action, not gestures!

On behalf of thousands of valuable human beings and not simply occupants of valuable units of real estate, I thank you who are already supporting a strong intro #523 and I thank the rest of you in advance for doing the right thing.