

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE



Joseph Strasburg

A few pages in from this column, there's a clip from *Reason* magazine about an all too common abuse of New York's rent stabilization law that goes to the heart of why policymakers, renters, editorial boards and opinion shapers treat building ownership differently than pretty much every other part of the economy. I'm talking about affluent professionals and other moneyed renters enjoying the benefit of a rent stabilized lease while owning a beach or country home. Whether the artificially low rent is what enabled owning a Hamptons or North Fork or Hudson Valley home or they were rich to begin with, this "legal abuse" is a perversion of the intent of rent regulation – to assist the economically distressed. Adding privileged insult to entitled injury, some of these stabilized tenants are also renting their homes out for thousands a week.

This offensive subsidizing of luxury lifestyles happens out in the open. You just have to know where to look. Minutes of Town Board meetings in which a subsidized Manhattan tenant seeks permission to rent out her home in the Catskills for a week at a time. Airbnb listings matched against tax records. Professors' resumes on college websites compared to DHCR building listings and old White Pages. Wedding announcements and obituaries. New York City mailing addresses for homes sixty or eighty miles away from Manhattan. Conversations at dinner parties.

Or just ask building managers or superintendents which tenants load up their SUVs to head up the Catskills or disappear for weeks at a time every summer. Once you start really thinking about it, you see the clues everywhere. Resident parking permits for Long Island beaches affixed to cars parked outside rent stabilized buildings in Brooklyn Heights. Cape Cod bumper stickers on old station wagons in Upper West Side garages. River Town parking permits for the MetroNorth Hudson Line parked in the West Village. Worn farmer's market tote bags from the Berkshires being used at the Gowanus Whole Foods or at Zabar's.

Those enjoying this scheme defend it and so do those who want to benefit from it. Getting a rent stabilized lease on a "great apartment" is sometimes referred to as finding a winning lottery ticket. Do those who didn't pick the winning lotto number one week then try to outlaw the lottery forever or do they play again? "All you need is a dollar and a dream" and "Hey, you never know." Sound familiar?

In order to understand this dynamic, RSA regularly polls New Yorkers throughout the city and state about their understanding of rent laws and their attitudes towards who benefits and who should. Going back nearly 30 years and as recently as the summer of 2022, we have asked these questions of you and your diverse neighbors. The results have been consistent and mirror, we believe, human nature.

New Yorkers understand that rent laws are unfair. They believe there should be some sort of means testing. They know it's a broken system and that the rich benefit at the expense of those in actual need. They understand that housing, especially affordable housing, is a pressing issue. Poll respondents throughout the state – year after year and decade after decade – believe in notions of fairness and they know rent laws aren't fair. New Yorkers everywhere are very well informed on these issues.

But they still defend their privilege within this broken system. They either benefit themselves now or hope they will. They have a regulated lease to pass on to their children or grandchildren. They've either already profited from the system or are planning on doing so soon – all at the expense of private owners of stabilized apartments and buildings providing a public benefit that isn't means tested.

It's like readers of the *New York Times* – liberal on social issues and committed to expanded civil rights – but conservative on issues of class and privilege.

This is what we're up against. This is why our work depends on building coalitions, assertive public affairs, a realistic understanding of people, relationships based on years of honest dealing and, more often than not, patience.

We get good things done for members, especially in difficult times, based on seeing the world as it is while we work on policy changes that should be easier but never are.

Speaking of the *New York Times*, did you see that real estate column in July 2023 about the married couple, both working in finance technology, who had a rent stabilized lease on the far West Side who bought a country house before buying a Manhattan condo with a bid just under a million dollars in order to avoid the mansion tax? ■

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Editor: Michael Tobman **Assistant Editor:** Briana Spariosu **Production:** Christine Chu. Copyright 2024, Rent Stabilization Association of N.Y.C., Inc., 123 William Street, NY, NY 10038.

The RSA Reporter (ISSN #1089-9375) is published monthly (except August) by the Rent Stabilization Association of N.Y.C., Inc., 123 William Street, New York, NY 10038-3804. Periodicals postage paid at New York, NY.
POSTMASTER: Send address changes to The RSA Reporter, 123 William Street, 12th Floor, New York, NY 10038-3804.