

Homeless Advocacy Group To Count Manhattan's Vacant Properties

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HARLEM — A homeless advocacy group will start counting vacant lots and buildings in Manhattan next month, which they say can house those with nowhere to go.

Picture the Homeless, is joining Hunter College's Center for Community Planning and Development, to document the properties, in hopes of pushing the Bloomberg administration to do a citywide tally.

During Picture the Homeless' last vacant property count in 2007, they found 9,579 vacant buildings and lots city-wide, with 1,237 in Manhattan alone. The properties could house enough residences to empty the city's

shelter system, the group found.

"It's a way to push the city to do this on a consistent basis," said Kendall Jackman, one of the leaders of the campaign, standing across the street from a vacant building on East 115th Street and Third Avenue Thursday.

The group believes that the abandoned properties exacerbate the homeless problem by limiting housing options and inflating housing costs.

A City Council bill introduced by East Harlem Councilwoman Melissa Mark-Viverito would mandate an annual census of vacant properties citywide. However, the city has been resistant, saying it would cost too much to count the vacant properties.

Angela Tovar, of Hunter College's Center for Community Planning and Development, said the count in Manhattan will prove that the tally can be done using volunteers and limited resources.

For example, Mark-Viverito's office and that of other council members throughout the city will be used as an operations base to conduct the count. The group also created a crowd-sourced map of vacant buildings.

Mark-Viverito said she hopes the count will spur the city to create more "income-targeted" housing.

"We are making it difficult for people to live here and thrive here," she said.

East Harlem had one of the highest rates of vacant property in 2007. The count will also target community boards downtown.

Gene Rice, 71, who lives in Central Harlem, is staying with relatives but searching for his own apartment.

He received a Section 8 housing voucher but could not find a landlord that would accept it in the 180 days before it expired. Now, he's back on the two-year waiting list for a voucher.

"Truly affordable housing has become a cruel hope," said Rice.

Jackman said the count could help prove there is an abundance of vacant properties that could be renovated to house people such as Rice.

Private property owners who leave properties vacant for years as a speculative business move should be made to take action, she said. Renovating the vacant properties would also add to the city tax base and provide more money to run the city.

Looking at the windows of the boarded up building on Third Avenue, all Rice could do was shake his head.

"That building is structurally sound. People could be living there right now," he said. "The politics of this situation just don't make sense."

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