

Letter to the Editor...

To: Director of the Department of Housing, City of Los Angeles

In 2003, I received an Order to Comply regarding various items which the Department stated were violations, on two well maintained buildings (one is a 6 unit building, and the other is a 7 unit building) I own in Sherman Oaks. I immediately fixed those violations and contested others which as it turned out should never have been included in their list. For several months I attempted to obtain verification, in writing, from three different staff people that the building was in compliance. My repeated efforts to get a response from the Department were to no avail and finally on December 15, 2003, I received notice that a hearing was scheduled four days later and that I would need to appear.

I appeared for the so called "hearing" which was nothing more than a waste of time, both mine and theirs. During the 15 or so minutes allotted to my case, it was clear to me that nothing I could say or present would alter the outcome which appeared to have been determined before my arrival.

I was charged a hearing fee, as well as a re-inspection fee with a threat that it would be doubled if not paid within thirty days. I did pay the fees but also sent my well documented case to the Housing Dept, with the promise of taking the matter to court if the fees were not refunded. Since I am 72 years old, I now have more time to defend myself, with the aid of a very good secretary. I wasted a lot of time, as well as a good deal of emotional stress. They did, in fact, refund the hearing and the re-inspection fees, without a hint of an apology. I guess they just wanted this embarrassment to go away. I though I had already seen the full gamut of bureaucratic inefficiency and audacity, until I began receiving more communications from the Department.

On May 21, 2004, the Dept of Housing sent me a bill for rental registration for the 6-unit building in Sherman Oaks, for the period starting from 2000 through 2003, excluding 2002. I promptly located my cancelled checks and sent copies as proof of payment. Apparently, the matter was closed.

On October 19, 2004, I received a similar bill for the period starting from March 1999 through 2003, excluding 2002, pertaining to the 7-unit apartment building. Of course, I have cancelled checks to prove payment of this as well. I am wondering whether these bills are a curious demonstration of sequential ineptitude or whether they may be intentional harassment as a consequence of my refusing to kowtow to the arbitrary demands of the Department and its rotating staff. Does the Department have bookkeepers that record bills paid? Or do they make a habit of expecting citizens to repeatedly provide proof of payment, more than five years after the fact? What is the statute of limitations on these demands?

As a crowning touch, the latest bill also includes demand for payment of the previously disputed hearing and re-inspection fees which had already been paid AND REFUNDED! I'm sure that countless people have had dreadful experiences with the Housing Department.

With the numbers of blighted and unsafe buildings in the city, one would hope that the Department would allocate more of its resources toward addressing actual safety hazards, rather than nitpicking on well-maintained properties. Perhaps it is easier to harass a conscientious property owner than to effect actual change in more challenging cases.

Sincerely,
G.G., Apartment Owner