Victories For Tenants and For Democracy! Big Month For MVUT!!

MVUT had an exceptionally busy and successful month, scoring three (3) separate and distinct wins:

1) Helped secure low guidelines for rent-regulated tenants!

2) Promoted a Mt. Vernon City Council Resolution that passed calling for the overturning of the disastrous U. S. Supreme Court decision, Citizens United!!

3) Prevented 18 evictions and helped rehouse 1 family!!!

1) Low Guidelines

MVUT was the key player, organizing tenants for participation in the three (3) Public Hearings and the two (2) subsequent Public Meetings that resulted in the Westchester Rent Guidelines Board (WRGB) passing renewal guidelines of 1.25% for one (1) year renewals, and 2.25% for two (2) year renewals (see copy of June 28 Journal News article enclosed). We worked closely with Tenant Representative Genevieve Roche who produced and distributed to the Board overwhelmingly compelling data and analysis showing continued and growing landlord profits in the midst of an economic recession - all at the tenants' expense. Three (3) Public Members of the Board, Ian Joseph, Eddie Mae Barnes and Jane Morgenstern all stood up to the landlords' representatives arguments and most especially, rejected the outrageously bullying, intimidation and condescending tactics of "Public Member" and Chair, Joseph Whelan, whose behavior at the final vote was so outrageous that even the Division of Housing & Community Renewal (DHCR) counsel, Michael Rosenblatt was beside himself. In addition to the low guidelines (the lowest of the four regulated jurisdictions, the others being NYC, Nassau and Rockland), the Board flatly and resoundingly rejected the landlords' attempts to pass minimal increases (what we call a "poor tax") of $20 for a one (1) year renewal and $40 for a two (2) year renewals. The guidelines passed and the "poor tax" was defeated by the same 5 -2 margin. The Chair doesn't vote except to break a tie. It was a great night for tenants! The landlords had originally called for 5% (1 year) and 9% (2 years) renewal increases the week before. At the final vote meeting, and in the face of the incredibly persuasive arguments adduced by Ms. Roche, they

(See Reverse)
reduced their call to 3.5% and 7% guidelines. Dennis and Ms. Roche both were on Journal News columnist Phil Reisman's VVOX radio program the next day, along with Landlord Representative Ken Finger by telephone. Dennis and Genevieve easily countered Mr. Finger's arguments, most of which were largely irrelevant, i.e. his argument against the very legitimacy of the law that the guidelines apply to - the Emergency Tenant Protection Act (ETPA). Those low guidelines will save tenants in Westchester literally hundreds of thousands of dollars over the next two (2) years! That money is much better in tenants' hands and to be spent in the local economy, rather than lining the already bulging pockets of Westchester landlords!

2) Citizans United

MVUT lobbyed the Mt. Vernon City Council to pass a resolution in opposition to the horrible United States Supreme Court decision in Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission which equated campaign spending with free speech. There is a national movement to overturn this decision by having local jurisdictions (City Councils, Town Boards, County Boards, State Legislatures, etc.) pass a Resolution calling on Congress to pass a Constitutional Amendment to overturn this wrongheaded decision. It's a real opportunity for people throughout the country to get involved locally and say that our democracy should not be for sale to the highest bidder. Individual citizens cannot compete with the nearly unlimited funds of huge corporations and the many billionaires in the country. If we really believe in democracy - one man, one vote etc., we must remove the huge infusion of money already being unleashed by Citizens United.

The Mt. Vernon City Council responded to MVUT's entreaties and passed a Resolution on June 13 calling for the Congress to amend the Constitution (see copy of Resolution on reverse side of The Journal News article). Thanks City Council. If you know of others who would like to do likewise in other communities, call the MVUT office and we'll help. We'll do a Community View in The Journal News shortly on this. Watch for it.

3) MVUT’s Homelessness Prevention Program (HPP)

With all of the other work we were doing and winning on in June we also stopped eighteen (18) evictions and rehoused one (1) family! How about that?!

Support Tenant Rights!
Support Economic Justice!!
Support MVUT!!!
Tenants applaud passage of low rent increases

By Elizabeth Ganga
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WHITE PLAINS — The Westchester Rent Guidelines Board passed increases for regulated apartments Wednesday of 1.25 percent for one-year leases and 2.25 percent for two-year leases, leading to applause from the tenant side of the divided auditorium at the Supreme Court building.

The vote was 5-2, with the landlord members voting no.

The board rejected an effort from the landlord members to add minimum increases of $20 a month for one-year leases and $40 for two-year leases.

Jane Morgenstern, a public member of the board, said though she supported minimums last year, she rejected the argument that people paying low-end rents were not paying their fair share. “I don’t believe this should turn into an annual event,” she said of adding minimum rents.

Landlords had asked in public hearings for increases of 5 percent with a $50 monthly minimum for one-year leases and 9 percent or a $90 monthly minimum for two-year leases.

But Wednesday they brought their request down to 3.5 percent and 7.5 percent, saying it was the minimum to keep the landlords even. Their disappointment with the vote was evident. “I think the board did not understand that the landlords are actually hurting,” said Ken Nilsen of the Building and Realty Institute, which represents building owners.

“The reduction in maintenance expenditures this year is a reflection of the fact that cash flow is just not sufficient to maintain the buildings.”

But tenants and their advocates, who were hoping for no increase, were pleased with the low numbers.

Mayra Gonzalez of New Rochelle said many of the lowest-rent apartments are occupied by seniors who only get Social Security increases every few years.

Landlords, she said, pointing to the arguments of public member Ian Joseph, make more than 12 percent profits on their buildings.

“Yet the landlords want to increase every year,” she said. “The ratio does not match and I think it’s unjust.”

The Guidelines Board sets rents for less than 30,000 apartments regulated under the Emergency Tenant Protection Act.

The increases apply to leases signed in the year starting Oct. 1.

Eight of the nine members attended the meeting, and Chairman Joseph Whelan didn’t vote.

Board member Elsa Rubin did not attend this year’s meetings.

(See Over)
WHEREAS, in 2010 the United States Supreme Court issued its decision in *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission*, holding that independent spending on elections by corporations and other groups could not be limited by government regulations; and

WHEREAS, this decision rolled back the legal restrictions on corporate spending in the electoral process, allowing for unlimited corporate spending to influence elections, candidate selection, and policy decisions; and

WHEREAS, in reaching its decision, a majority of the Supreme Court, relying on prior decisions, interpreted the First Amendment of the Constitution to afford corporations the same free speech protections as natural persons; and

WHEREAS, in his eloquent dissent, Justice John Paul Stevens rightly recognized that "corporations have no consciences, no beliefs, no feelings, no thoughts, no desires. Corporations help structure and facilitate the activities of human beings, to be sure, and their 'personhood' often serves as a useful legal fiction. But they are not themselves members of 'We the People' by whom and for whom our Constitution was established"; and

WHEREAS, the Court's decision in *Citizens United* severely hampers the ability of federal, state and local governments to enact reasonable campaign finance reforms and regulations regarding corporate political activity; and

WHEREAS, Corporations should not be afforded the entirety of protections or "rights" of natural persons, such that the expenditure of corporate money to influence the electoral process is a form of constitutionally protected speech; and

WHEREAS, several proposed amendments to the Constitution have been introduced in Congress that would allow governments to regulate the raising and spending of money by corporations to influence elections;

NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED, that the Mount Vernon City Council opposes the Supreme Court's interpretation of the Constitution in *Citizens United* regarding the constitutional rights of corporations, and supports amending the Constitution to provide that corporations are not entitled to the entirety of protections or "rights" of natural persons, specifically so that the expenditure of corporate money to influence the electoral process is no longer a form of constitutionally protected speech, and calls on Congress to begin the process of amending the Constitution.