

The Journal News

THURSDAY, JUNE 27, 2013

Rent board OKs 3%, 4% hikes

By Elizabeth Ganga
eganga@lohud.com

WHITE PLAINS — The Westchester Rent Guidelines Board set rent hikes for regulated apartments in the county at 3 percent for one-year leases and 4 percent for two-year leases. At a meeting Wednesday night, the board also set minimum increases of \$15 and \$20, respectively, which will affect people with rents around \$500.

The vote was 5-3 with one tenant representative absent and the other voting "no," along with two public members.

The final numbers were a compromise between Ian Joseph, a public member, and Kenneth Finger, a landlord representative.

In making the earlier motion for a 2.5 percent increase for one-year leases, with a \$10 minimum and 3.5 percent with a \$15 minimum for two-year leases, Joseph argued that the economy seems to have reached a new normal. Though landlords should get something, he said, there shouldn't be a sudden spike in rents.

"We need to gradually move into this, like a relationship," he said.

Both initial proposals by tenant and landlord members failed.

Dennis Walsh, a tenant advocate in the audience from Dobbs Ferry,

said the absence of the second tenant member hurt their cause.

"Most of the people who are going to be affected by this are people below the poverty level," he said.

The Guidelines Board sets rents for leases expiring in the year after Oct. 1 for about 30,000 apartments regulated under the Emergency Tenant Protection Act in municipalities that have opted in to the act. In most of the 18 communities in Westchester, the law applies to buildings of six or more units built before 1974.

Last year the board set increases of 1.25 percent for one-year leases and 2.25 percent for two-year leases.

The two landlord representatives argued for increases equal to those set in New York City, which adopted 4 percent for one-year leases and 7.75 for two-year leases. Finger said a string of low increases has spurred building owners to spend less on maintenance.

"It's driving landlords out," he said. "It's destroying the affordable housing stock."

But the Rev. Emma Jean Loftin-Woods, the tenant member, said tenants are still dealing with high costs for food and medicine and often pay a high percentage of their income for rent. Landlords, on the other hand, seem to expect guaranteed profits, she said.

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The New York Times

NEW YORK, TUESDAY, JULY 2, 2013

Making \$7.75 an Hour, and Figuring There's Little to Lose by Speaking Out

Shenita Simon watches a twilight rain wash across Brownsville. Softly, from her apartment in a public housing tower, she begins to talk of her life's impossible mathematics.

MICHAEL POWELL
GOTHAM

This 25-year-old woman with striking black eyes and hair pulled back in a bun is a shift manager at KFC — her title is good for 50 cents an hour above minimum wage.

From this, she and her husband, Jude Toussaint, an unemployed antenna installer, buy clothes for their three children and food, and help her mother with the rent.

Her wages erode on all sides. Often, she said, she finds her check is hours short. And when she works overtime, she receives two checks, each at straight time, as if she worked for two different employers rather than a single KFC across from Bargain Land on Pitkin Avenue in Brooklyn.

Last year boiling oil spilled over and scalded her hands; she received \$58 a

week in workers' compensation, she said. Nearly every day her manager called and demanded: When are you returning to work?

She looks you square in the eyes. "I'm beyond not satisfied," she says. "This isn't the life I want for my children. This isn't the life I want for myself."

Forget the gilded dreams of 90th-floor penthouse-dwelling hedge fund masters for just a second. We'll mourn the ridiculously high price tag for brownstones in another column. The economic comebacks of New York, of New Jersey and of so many states ride piggyback on the growth of low-wage jobs, on the hiring of those who dip French fries in boiling oil and pull flesh off the bones of factory chickens.

Fast-food businesses have added 25,000 jobs in New York in the past decade. Last week I sat in a low-ceiling City Council hearing room and listened and squirmed as fast-food workers — the Wendy's hamburger slinger, the Papa John's bike delivery man, the woman who mops floors in KFC — recounted the prosaic facts of their lives for a fact-finding panel.

There was a Mexican man with gray hair and a bushy mustache who trained as an architect. His two daughters live in Mexico and depend on him, and he sleeps in a basement and makes \$5 an hour delivering Papa John's pizza.

"I delivered during Hurricane Sandy," he said in Spanish. "They told us to ride bent over, so that the pizzas didn't get wet."

Naquasia Legrand, a 22-year-old from Canarsie, Brooklyn, works at two KFCs. She washes dishes at one for \$7.75 and mops floors at the other for \$8. She says she must work four or five hours each week off the clock.

She needed to buy a MetroCard last week so she skipped lunch. She shakes her head. "I think I deserve to eat lunch."

The apostles of our new economy advise us that the middle and working classes need to "retool," to learn new skills, to become more productive. Yes, well, O.K. When, where and with what time and whose money?

There is good news to be heard here. Workers who earn minimum wage realize their employers have no real hold on their tongues.

How this ends is uncertain. American labor law is a beaten cur. Strikes are risky, and fast-food corporations are well-heeled adversaries. The current campaigns hope to embarrass these corporations.

As often, though, this sector carries an immunity to shame.

Papa John's chief executive, John Schnatter, makes \$2 million per year and lives on a faux medieval estate outside Louisville, Ky. He spoke recently of trying to subvert Obamacare's provisions by cutting the hours of all of his workers to less than 30 hours. YUM! Brands, which owns KFC and Taco Bell and whose chief executive makes \$11.3 million per year, helped lead the battle against paid sick days.

Mention long odds to these workers and they lead you back to the mathematics. They bob along the poverty line in an impossibly expensive city. What's to lose?

Ms. Simon, still dressed in the black KFC shirt with "The Original Original" logo, shakes her head when asked if she's worried about annoying her employer. "I have no lies to tell," she says. "This is just my life."



ERIC THAYER FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Shenita Simon, who works at KFC, said, "I'm beyond not satisfied."

"I'm making the minimum wage plus 50 cents," notes Ms. Simon. "I definitely can find another job."

A great ferment brews. The car washers of the Bronx and Brooklyn have voted to form unions, as have security guards at Kennedy Airport. Twice in the past nine months, fast-food workers — with the aid of Fast Food Forward, a community organizing and labor coalition — have rallied and demanded higher wages and an end to wage theft.

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The Journal News

TUESDAY, JUNE 18, 2013

Legislators approve rent income law

Westchester plan bans landlord bias against subsidized tenants

By Elizabeth Ganga
eganga@lohud.com

Landlords in Westchester will not be able to turn down renters just because they pay rent using a Section 8 voucher, disability benefits, Social Security or other government assistance as soon as a law passed Monday by the county

Board of Legislators takes effect.

The vote nearly puts to rest one of the major fights over the county's 2009 fair housing settlement with the federal government and one of the obstacles to the county receiving millions in community development grants.

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VOTE: Income rule gets approval

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But there are battles yet to come that may make it look like a schoolyard tussle.

The vote was 15-2, with several Republicans overcoming a distaste for the law to vote for it. Republican Legislators Gordon Burrows of Yonkers and John Testa of Peekskill switched their votes from 2010, as did Democratic Legislator Michael Kaplowitz of Somers.

"Let's solve one of these debates with the federal government," said Legislator Jim Maisano, R-New Rochelle. "Let's fix it."

Maisano, the Republican minority leader and the lone Republican to vote for the measure in 2010, said that besides moving past some of the drama with the federal government, he supported the law because a renter's income is sometimes used as a pretext for racial discrimination.

County Executive Rob Astorino has opposed the law but he promised to sign it after a federal appellate court decided his veto of similar legislation in 2010 violated the fair housing settlement and the Justice Department threatened to seek a contempt order against him.

The settlement also requires the county to facilitate the construction of 750 units of affordable housing in largely white communities and break down barriers to fair housing in Westchester municipalities.

Astorino has frequently lashed out at the Department of Housing and Urban Development and accused the agency of pushing beyond the settlement.

Legislator Michael Smith, R-Greenburgh, one of the two "no" votes with Legislator David Gelfarb, R-Rye Brook, said the vote would hang over the county board.

"This vote represents a stripping of our constitutional rights," he said. "If Shakespeare were here he'd be talking about a tragedy of epic proportions."

The bill adds a new class to the county's fair housing law making it illegal to discriminate over a list of types of income, though landlords are allowed to use reasonable business judgment in rejecting potential tenants.

Penalties can reach \$50,000.

The bill exempts cooperatives, condos and buildings with six units or fewer. It will sunset in five years.

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The New York Times

NEW YORK, FRIDAY, MAY 31, 2013

PAUL KRUGMAN

From The Mouths Of Babes

Like many observers, I usually read reports about political goings-on with a sort of weary cynicism. Every once in a while, however, politicians do something so wrong, substantively and morally, that cynicism just won't cut it; it's time to get really angry instead. So it is with the ugly, destructive war against food stamps.

The food stamp program — which these days actually uses debit cards, and is officially known as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program — tries to provide modest but crucial aid to families in need. And the evidence is crystal clear both that the overwhelming majority of food stamp recipients really need the help, and that the program is highly successful at reducing “food insecurity,” in which families go hungry at least some of the time.

Food stamps have played an especially useful — indeed, almost heroic — role in recent years. In fact, they have done triple duty.

First, as millions of workers lost their jobs through no fault of their own, many families turned to food stamps to help them get by — and while food aid is no substitute for a good job, it did significantly mitigate their misery. Food stamps were especially helpful to children who would otherwise be living in extreme poverty, defined as an income less than half the official poverty line.

But there's more. Why is our economy depressed? Because many players in the economy slashed spending at the same time, while relatively few players were willing to spend more. And because the economy is not like an individual household — your spending is my income, my spending is your income — the result was a general fall in incomes and plunge in employment. We desperately needed (and still need) public policies to promote higher spending on a temporary basis — and the expansion of food stamps, which helps families living on the edge and let them spend more on other necessities, is just such a policy.

Indeed, estimates from the consulting firm Moody's Analytics suggest that each dollar spent on food stamps in a depressed economy raises G.D.P. by

about \$1.70 — which means, by the way, that much of the money laid out to help families in need actually comes right back to the government in the form of higher revenue.

Wait, we're not done yet. Food stamps greatly reduce food insecurity among low-income children, which, in turn, greatly enhances their chances of doing well in school and growing up to be successful, productive adults. So food stamps are in a very real sense an investment in the nation's future — an investment that in the long run almost surely reduces the budget deficit, because tomorrow's adults will also be tomorrow's taxpayers.

So what do Republicans want to do with this paragon of programs? First, shrink it; then, effectively kill it.

The shrinking part comes from the latest farm bill released by the House Agriculture Committee (for historical reasons, the food stamp program is administered by the Agriculture Department). That bill would push about two million people off the program. You should bear in mind, by the way, that one effect of the sequester has been to pose a serious threat to a different but related program that provides nutritional aid to millions of pregnant mothers, infants, and children. Ensuring that the next generation grows up nutritionally deprived — now that's what I call forward thinking.

And why must food stamps be cut? We can't afford it, say politicians like Representative Stephen Fincher, a Republican of Tennessee, who backed his position with biblical quotations — and who also, it turns out, has personally received millions in farm subsidies over the years.

These cuts are, however, just the beginning of the assault on food stamps. Remember, Representative Paul Ryan's budget is still the official G.O.P. position on fiscal policy; and that budget calls for converting food stamps into a block grant program with sharply reduced spending. If this proposal had been in effect when the Great Recession struck, the food stamp program could not have expanded the way it did, which would have meant vastly more hardship, including a lot of outright hunger, for millions of Americans, and for children in particular.

Look, I understand the supposed rationale: We're becoming a nation of takers, and doing stuff like feeding poor children and giving them adequate health care are just creating a culture of dependency — and that culture of dependency, not runaway bankers, somehow caused our economic crisis.

But I wonder whether even Republicans really believe that story — or at least are confident enough in their diagnosis to justify policies that more or less literally take food from the mouths of hungry children. As I said, there are times when cynicism just doesn't cut it; this is a time to get really, really angry. □

The ugly,
destructive war
on food stamps.

(SEE OVER)