

Please be aware of this scam described below which has affected homeowners in our entire community as well as other areas in Northeast Queens – Joe Amoroso, Zoning and Code Enforcement co-Chair, Queens Civic Congress.

http://www.nypost.com/p/news/local/queens/vulture_biz_stirs_XjP50whW0mtg1Gq7n9OTSI



Vulture biz stirs bogus-tix blitz

By ANGELA MONTEFINISE & KATHIANNE BONIELLO

Last Updated: 10:51 AM, December 27, 2009 *Posted:* 3:15 AM, December 27, 2009

It's New York's nastiest neighbor -- a Queens business that has made 1,030 calls to a city complaint hotline since September and sparked a sweeping inspection blitz against innocent homeowners.

The company made the flurry of 311 calls from three different phones, claiming on each occasion that the homeowners were illegally converting their basements into apartments, city sources said.

An army of city inspectors descended upon the middle-class neighborhoods in Flushing, Whitestone and other areas of northeast Queens, only to find that most complaints were completely bogus.

In some cases, inspectors discovered penny-ante violations that left furious residents with fines to pay or repair bills in the thousands of dollars.

City officials would not reveal the identity of the caller, but the city Department of Buildings is now investigating the calls.

Many angry residents and elected officials believe the "whistleblower" is a sleazy building-industry firm trying to drum up business by filing false complaints and then swooping in to fix them.

Most homeowners receiving DOB tickets have to go to an architect, engineer, permit expediter or home-improvement firm to fill out the necessary forms and do the necessary work to get the violations dropped.

"This company is obviously wasting limited city resources and pulling them away from real life-threatening situations," said City Councilman Tony Avella, whose Queens district was hit with a slew of the fake allegations. "For that, they should be thrown in jail. It's harassment of honest homeowners."

Several residents received letters from expeditors and engineers within days of being smacked with violations, many specifically offering basement-legalization services.

"I said right away, these are the people who are complaining," said 45-year Flushing resident Shirley Schachter, who received a letter three days after being cited for a minor violation.

A survey of 1,000 random properties by local homeowners in Schachter's area showed 500 identical allegations over seven days in September.

In some cases, complaints were made about vacant lots.

In total, there were 3,086 complaints of "illegal conversions" in Community Board 7 in northern Queens from September to November. During the same time period in 2008, there were only 298 such complaints.

Postal worker Paul Como was cited for violations after his whole Flushing block was hit with complaints. He now has to remove two beds he kept in his basement for visiting relatives, along with a mini-office, to avoid paying fines of up to \$2,500.

Avella said giving tickets for seemingly minor issues -- like having a television or couch in the basement -- will "chase away the middle class."

Department of Buildings spokesman Tony Sclafani said that inspectors must review any "illegal conversion" complaint. After a deadly fire ripped through several illegal apartments in Woodside, Queens, last month, the city launched a p.r. campaign against the potential firetraps.

angela.montefinise@nypost.com