

HOME › FEATURED › NEIGHBORHOOD › POLITICS › [THE LANDLORDS WROTE THE LAWS. SCHNEIDERMAN WANTS TO CHANGE THEM.](#)

## The Landlords Wrote the Laws. Schneiderman Wants to Change Them.

May 3, 2017 [Featured, Neighborhood, Politics](#)

By *George Capsis*



**END OF GREED:** Landlord Steve Croman's greed has wiped out decades-old family businesses on Christopher Street, prompting Attorney General Eric Schneiderman to offer laws that will end 20 years of landlord harassment immunity. *Photo by Maggie Berkvist.*

“Attorney General Eric Schneiderman is giving a press conference on tenant harassment and you gotta go,” demanded Nelly Godfrey who lost her Christopher Street restaurant to Steve Croman—the West Village landlord who is now facing prison time and is easily vying for the number one spot as “The Worst Landlord in New York.”

We drove up the “glitter and swank” of Park Avenue until we crested the hill at 110th Street and saw before us NYCHA-studded Spanish Harlem. We faced an approaching train running on the elevated tracks held up by blackened stone arches and, bang, at 115th Street we discovered the press conference taking place in a caged public area right under the tracks.

As the conference broke up, a crowd of mostly Hispanics poured out with local politicians offering benevolent smiles to their landlord-harassed constituents. As Schneiderman spilled off the high podium right into my arms, I found myself saying, “You are one of the most articulate politicians we have. Why don’t you run for mayor?” I believe he mumbled something that allowed for the possibility.

Now for the shocker—“In the past 20 years, not a single landlord has been convicted of harassment of a rent-regulated tenant!”

Current State law demands that prosecutors reach an inexplicably high bar. For example, they have to prove physical injury. So, OK, that explains the repertoire of harassments, like turning off the heat and hot water and months and months of messy lead paint dust construction. But, wow, no convictions in 20 years—that is a shocker.

So how does Schneiderman plan to change the laws to, at last, trap, hold, and convict some of these amoral landlords?

The press release talks about ending “deceptive lending practices.” Croman’s technique was to buy cheap tenements housing nothing but rent-regulated tenants paying dirt cheap rents and then getting bank loans against them showing market rate rents. This is the crime that will probably send him to prison because it is out and out fraud, but it seems to be a standard technique (Croman’s lawyers have offered restitution money if he gets just two years of prison).



### ATTORNEY GENERAL SETS THE TRAP:

In 20 years, no slum landlord has ever been convicted of tenant harassment. However, at a recent Harlem press conference, Attorney General Eric Schneiderman (center) vowed to change the rules and finally hold slumlords accountable. Nelly Godfrey (pictured to the left of Schneiderman), who lost her restaurant Lima's Taste to landlord Steve Croman, who is presently being prosecuted by Schneiderman.

*Photo by Henry Mori*

The Attorney General is also offering that he is making it illegal to harass or endanger a rent-regulated tenant. (Croman used an ex-cop who would burst into an apartment with documents in his hand that might have been an illegal immigrant extradition order but was actually a contract to vacate for a piddling fee—"Sign here, sign here...")

"Our current laws are outdated, ineffective, and totally inadequate to keep tenants safe from unscrupulous landlords," offered Schneiderman. He was followed by a chorus of Amens from all of the usual politicians.

Yes, well, the rent laws were enacted in 1943 when returning GIs wanted to marry and start families and couldn't find affordable apartments since none were built through the depression and war years. But, like all bureaucratic dictums designed to ease the problems of one decade, they generate their own in another (New York has the oldest rent laws in the country).

When I tried to move my two little girls, Athena and Ariadne, into the first-floor garden apartment at 69 Charles so they could walk to P.S. 41 with Mom looking on, I received a letter from a lawyer who stated that he had been victorious in keeping his client who occupied that

apartment in eight court actions against three previous landlords. He recommended that I sell my contract. Later, before the hearing officer, the client explained that she simply could not vacate the apartment because her dog used the garden and a publishing couple used the less-than-\$100-dollar apartment as a hotel room when they were away from their Westchester home and office.

Now, here in the West Village, very old people are trapped in rent-regulated apartments five flights up. As they get older, they are less and less able to climb the stairs or fight the avaricious landlords. The hope is that the new Schneiderman laws will protect them but maybe we should think about affordable rents for seniors as we think of affordable medicine for seniors (i.e., Medicare). We can call it Rentacare.

We should be able, in our later years, to join a sister in Florida and pay the same rent, or less than we paid for our rent-stabilized apartment on Charles Street. We should also open that apartment to kids just out of college who pay a graduated rent which increases with their salary till it hits market rate and, then, no more regulation. The inequity of decades of rent stabilization is cruelly felt when somebody boasts that he is paying a rent-controlled amount and mentions a figure about the size of your cable bill.

We need civic leaders that can look beyond the next election and restore a fair and open market for the next several generations of West Villagers—Rentacare.