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Michael Walker

Michael Walker, a Toronto city councillor, has pushed for tenant rights for years, recently for reform of the Tenant Protection Act, commonly referred to as the “landlord protection act”.

He is scheduled to speak at an Ottawa conference regarding tenant issues later this month, begging the question of whether Ottawa should adopt the Toronto model of fighting for tenant rights through city council.

While the provincial government dictates legislation over affordable housing and landlord-tenant issues, building standards are under municipal jurisdiction. City council also uses its position to press the provincial government for action.

Ottawa’s upcoming first-ever Conference to Improve the Lives of Tenants, planned for Mar. 24, includes guest speakers and a tenant panel with a discussion on how tenants have organized themselves in the past.

“We hope it is a stepping stone to get tenants thinking that maybe they should be asking the government for more,” says Rob MacDonald.

A senior worker at Housing Help, an Ottawa-based organization that works with people dealing with housing problems, MacDonald was instrumental in the planning of this event. He says the conference will look at the actions Michael Walker has taken in Toronto that haven’t been taken in Ottawa.

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Michael Walker is Toronto's Tenant Advocate and chairs the city's tenant defence subcommittee. Under this position, Walker pitched rent control reforms to the Toronto government in Dec. 2005.

These reforms came about in response to the failure of Ontario's Liberal Premier Dalton McGuinty to bring back "real rent control". In Aug. 2003 McGuinty stated that:

"We will repeal the Harris-Eves government's Tenant Protection Act and we will bring back real Rent Control that protects tenant from excessive rent increases. We will get rid of vacancy decontrol which allows unlimited rent increases on a unit when a tenant leaves."

The Tenant Protection Act was introduced by the Ontario Conservative government in 1998. Walker has interpreted the act as reflecting "the belief that by abandoning various forms of Rent Control, new rental housing construction would be stimulated and existing stock would be upgraded and maintained," and as failing, in practice, to "address affordable rental housing needs or to benefit tenants."

Walker says that, "the only way to solve [tenants'] problems is to have a politician out there fighting for them."

In the time since McGuinty's promises were made, the provincial government's only actions were to release a Consultation on Residential Tenancy Reform in 2004, on which Toronto city council (along with Walker) made recommendations.

These recommendations were incorporated into Bill 109, the Residential Tenancies Act, introduced in June 2006 which is in the stages of becoming law.

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In Toronto, Walker's subcommittee works in association with Toronto's Federation of Metro Tenants' Associations to fight to restore real rent control and fight for tenant rights.

The group administers Toronto's tenant outreach program and advocates for grants from the city to tenants' associations to fight above-guideline rent increases.

The Federation of Ottawa-Carleton Tenants Association, similar in nature to Toronto's, could no longer sustain itself on the little amount of municipal money allotted, when the Conservative government in Ontario removed funding. For the same reason, the Ottawa Council for Low Income Support Services no longer exists.

"Toronto was lucky and actually had a municipal government that cared about these issues," says MacDonald, who was on the federation's board. He calls the association's dissolution "unfortunate", although saying that he doesn't think we should keep looking at the past models to organize tenants in the Ottawa area.

"Ottawa has a different culture that has evolved over 20 years. I think tenants have been polite for too long and we haven't got a damn thing. Why shouldn't we be demanding more from city council?"

Forty per cent of Ottawa's population and just under 50% of Toronto's live as tenants. Their most pressing issues are those of poor maintenance, high rent increases and evictions.

These issues are directly related to issues of poverty. Christina Marchant, Director of Community Services at Family Services à la famille Ottawa explains her

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counseling organization's involvement with the conference.

“While [clients] may be requesting help to deal with anxiety, family violence, depression, or war trauma, we find more and more that we cannot help them with these issues because they have more immediate needs: children who don't sleep at night because their homes aren't heated; children who can't learn at school because they don't have adequate food.”

She says that issues like anxiety and depression impact people's ability to work, parent, become financially stable, or access resources, keeping them “stuck” living in poverty.

Toronto's tenant defence subcommittee also hosts an annual tenant forum to allow tenants' opinions to be heard. He says he thinks Ottawa's first conference comes at a good time.

“It should raise public awareness. A provincial election is coming up in October,” he says.

About the tenant slogan “Together we are strong”, Walker comments that “They can only be strong through the ballot box.” He says tenants need to elect people that want their voices heard.

Macdonald says he thinks it is a combination of voting for who will help [tenants] and putting pressure on who is in power at the time. He says that provincial governments often listen to lobbying landlords and corporations that “have all their lawyers with their issues done up beautifully” and ignore tenants.

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Without an organization in Ottawa lobbying as the Federation of Metro Tenants' Associations does in Toronto, it is a wonder that Ottawa tenants' voices aren't heard. This conference will give them an opportunity to be inspired.