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Council Member Aims To Close a Landmark Loophole

By GRACE RAUH, Staff Reporter of the Sun | March 14, 2007

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NEW YORK CITY OFFICIALS COULD GAIN A POWERFUL NEW tool to save would-be historic and landmark buildings from the wrecking ball.

Under a bill to be introduced today by City Council Member Rosie Mendez of Manhattan, the Department of Buildings would be allowed to revoke building permits for newly designated landmark properties if the owners have not completed a substantial amount of work or spent a significant amount of money on the projects when landmark status is granted.

The bill's supporters say it is common for developers to obtain building permits after purchasing properties that may be eligible for landmark status to ensure they have the ability to renovate or demolish in the future, even if the properties are designated landmarks.

The Landmarks Preservation Commission approves renovation and construction projects on landmark and historic properties in New York, but the normal review process does not apply to owners of landmark buildings who already had building permits before the status of their property changed.

"I just felt like this was a loophole," Ms. Mendez said.

Last summer, the developer of a former school in the East Village, P.S. 64, had building permits for the property and defaced historic architectural details after it was named a landmark. The developer, Gregg Singer, said at the time his building, which is in Ms. Mendez's district, was named a landmark only in an attempt to prevent him from developing the property.

There are more than 23,000 properties in New York City, or 2.3% of the city's property, that are landmarks or part of historic districts, and therefore overseen by the commission.

The executive director of the Historic Districts Council, Simeon Bankoff, said there have been a number of recent high-profile cases that illustrate the need for this bill.

"I think it's timely," he said. "It gives expanded preservation powers to the city."



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