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Suffolk Passes Housing Antidiscrimination Bill

Friday, September 22, 2006

Suffolk County Executive Steve Levy held a press conference today to publicly applaud passage by the County Legislature of a bill that will strengthen the County's power to combat racial discrimination in housing matters.



Suffolk County Executive Steve Levy (center, seated) with Legislator Ellie Mystal (seated left) and Legislator Ricardo Montano (seated right) and antidiscrimination activists.

"From my first day in office, as early as my inaugural address, I vowed to work with advocates and my colleagues in government to end this dirty little secret," the County Executive said. "The Legislature's unanimous passage of this bill earlier this week is a historic moment in our fight against the insidious and intolerable practice of racial steering and housing discrimination. In a civilized society, in the 21st century, we can no longer turn a blind eye and a deaf ear towards blatant housing discrimination. Suffolk residents with the last name of Patel, Wang or Diaz should have just as much right to buy or rent a house where they choose as those named Jones or Smith."

"With the signing of this new Suffolk County law, now all Long Islanders who are victims of housing discrimination will have access to County enforcement systems," said Elaine Gross, President of ERASE Racism, who was present at the press conference. "Congratulations to the Suffolk County Executive and the Legislators that co-sponsored this bill for taking this important step forward."

Mr. Levy's office said that he collaborated with County Legislators Ricardo Montano (D-Central Islip) and Ellie Mystal (D-Amityville) and ERASE Racism in crafting the bill.

"I am pleased that after 25 years Suffolk County has finally passed this landmark legislation," Legislator Montano said. "This legislation will provide genuine enforcement powers for the Federal Fair Housing Act and level the playing field for those whose rights have been violated. I am proud that my colleagues have joined the County Executive, Legislator Mystal and myself in unanimously approving this substantive legislation."

Legislator Mystal said, "This landmark measure will allow all of our Suffolk residents to exercise their constitutional right to live where they please."

"Unfortunately, housing discrimination is still far too prevalent and in order to combat it, strong enforcement is needed at all levels of government - federal, state, and local," said Dr. Steven Moss, Co-Chair of the County Anti-Bias Task Force. "This legislation will go far in making that a reality by giving the Commission the tools necessary to address this long-standing problem."

A 2005 study by the Syosset-based ERASE Racism and other anti-discrimination groups concluded that Long Island is the third most segregated suburban region in the nation, after Newark, NJ and Cleveland, OH. They succeeded in getting the county executives of both counties onboard for a drive to end this.

Under the bill, Suffolk County's Human Rights Commission (HRC) can investigate complaints of discrimination and bring cases to a County-appointed panel of Administrative Law Judges. The may now levy civil penalties for violations and impose education on violators. Repeat violators may be subject to punitive damages under the bill. There will be a judicial review and appeals process.

The County Executive's office says that the bill brings Suffolk law in line with Federal anti-discrimination laws and will qualify the County for federal dollars to assist in the enforcement of housing discrimination proceedings and enforcement actions. Prohibitions against predatory lending practices have been added to the measure, and under the new system, real estate brokers can be held responsible for discriminatory acts committed by real estate agents in their employ.

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