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Suffolk Legislator Gregory Announces Crackdown on Zombie Property Scams

MARCH 2, 2016 BY

Gregory to Host Housing Education Seminar March 29

(Long Island, NY) Suffolk County Legislature Presiding Officer DuWayne Gregory yesterday announced a crackdown on squatters at zombie houses, as well as on individuals who misrepresent themselves as property owners and rent these homes to unsuspecting tenants.

After receiving several complaints from constituents, Gregory met with Suffolk County Police Department Inspector Matt Lewis, who has worked with Suffolk County Police Commissioner Sini to crack down on the practice. As part of the effort, the Suffolk County Police Department has begun conducting summary arrests of squatters who have no good faith belief they have any right to the properties at which they are residing. The Department has also started a registry of vacant properties in the county. Owners are encouraged to notify the police of vacant properties, which will enable officers to be better informed when responding to reports of activity at these homes.



Presiding Officer DuWayne Gregory speaks at a March 1 press conference at which he announced a crackdown on squatters at zombie houses, as well as on individuals who misrepresent themselves as property owners and rent these homes to unsuspecting tenants. 18th District Legislator William Spencer, M.D. looks on. Photo Credit: Suffolk County.

"Long Island is one of the most expensive places to live in the nation, and it's despicable that these criminals are preying on people trying to find a home with affordable rent," said Presiding Officer Gregory. "Our message today is clear: Suffolk County absolutely will not tolerate this unscrupulous practice, and we will find you. Additionally, I encourage any owners of vacant properties to notify the police that no one should ever be found residing at these locations."

Gregory was joined at the press conference by Commissioner Sini, Deputy Presiding Officer Rob Calarco, 3rd District Legislator Kate Browning, 6th District Legislator Sarah Anker, 18th District Legislator William Spencer, M.D., a representative of New York Attorney General Eric Schneiderman, and representatives of several local nonprofits dedicated to housing-related issues.

"Let's be clear: There are no squatters' rights in Suffolk County," said Commissioner Sini. "The Suffolk County Police Department understands that illegal squatters often invite criminal activity into our communities. We urge residents to share information with their local precinct so that the police can help put an end to this scourge. I want to thank Presiding Officer Gregory for his leadership on this issue."

"This is an issue that has created many problems in the 3rd Legislative District," said Legislator Browning, who chairs the Legislature's Public Safety Committee. "Over the past two years, I have received about 15 complaints. Renters have been taken advantage of from these rental scams, by taking their security deposits and as much as two months' rent, to learn that the owner is not the legal owner. Some of the homes have become a problem with illegal activity. Unknown to the renter, some of these homes have also been deemed unsafe by the Town of Brookhaven. Two this past year were new homeowners finalizing a mortgage only to learn someone has rented their home. I am happy to see that Attorney General Eric Schneiderman and the Suffolk County Police Department will aggressively pursue the criminals who take advantage of the vacant homes in Suffolk County."

"We applaud Presiding Officer Gregory's efforts to alert the public about the horrendous scams that have been perpetrated against unsuspecting tenants and legitimate homeowners," said Michelle Santantonio, executive director of Long Island Housing Services. "Such abusive, fraudulent practices cause severe financial and emotional distress resulting in tremendous inconvenience for displaced families, some of whom are forced into homelessness as a result. Prospective tenants need to take necessary precautions to check on the legitimacy of those that are offering rental agreements."

"Many of those we service come to us while they are deep in the foreclosure process," said Thomas Goddard, a housing educator at the Community Development Corporation of Long Island. "The earlier homeowners feel any difficulty making their next mortgage payment, the more opportunities exist for retention. Seek out the assistance of a HUD-approved nonprofit that can assist you for free."

"We are very grateful to Presiding Officer DuWayne Gregory for raising awareness about scams and other criminal activities related to abandoned and zombie homes in our communities," said Greta Guarton, executive director of the Long Island Coalition for the Homeless. "The Long Island Coalition for the Homeless works with homeless and at-risk Long Islanders, some of whom have fallen victim to housing scams involving unauthorized individuals posing as landlords of unoccupied houses. Often, low income households use all their savings to move into a house only to later discover they are not legal tenants. We are hopeful that the Presiding Officer's message and workshops will make communities and potential

victims aware of these issues and how to avoid them."

"Searching for rental housing or any housing for that matter is stressful enough," said Angela Harmon of the Economic Opportunity Council of Suffolk. "You don't want to add to that stress by being swindled out of your hard-earned money by signing a worthless lease. One way tenants can protect themselves is to call the local tax receiver's office where the property is located and ask for the name of the owner on record. It's public information, and bottom line, make sure the people you are dealing with are who they say they are. Tenants can always reach out to a local housing counseling agency for help."

Presiding Officer Gregory will host a free housing education seminar March 29 at the Copiague Library from 6:30-8:30 p.m. The event will be an opportunity for residents to meet with government officials, law enforcement officers, housing counseling providers, real estate agents and legal service providers to become better informed of tenant, homeowner, and landlord rights and responsibilities. Landlords, tenants and owners of vacant properties are encouraged to attend to learn how to protect themselves from housing fraud. For more information on the seminar, please call Presiding Officer Gregory's district office at [631-854-1111](tel:631-854-1111).

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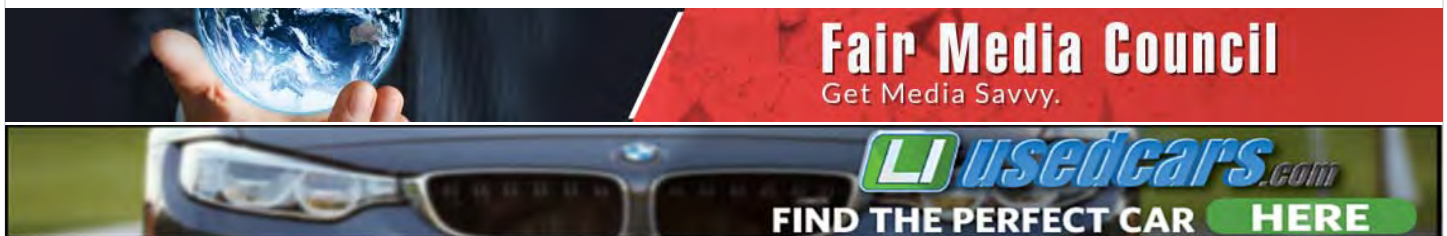
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