

[the housing situation in St. Paul](#)

Betty Speaker's Story

Betty Speaker was a 68-year-old homeowner who lived in the neighborhood behind the state capitol in St. Paul. She had never been late in making a mortgage or property-tax payment. Her troubles with the city of St. Paul began in March 2004 when city workers, excavating to make room for a new high-speed internet cable beneath the pavement, accidentally damaged the city's sewer line. Because the damaged line was on Speaker's property, the city decided to hold her responsible for making the repairs. She was given a list of city-approved contractors to do the work. Speaker paid one of them over \$3,000 to make the necessary repairs.

A city housing inspector named Lisa Martin, who visited the site, claimed that she saw rats near the damaged sewer line. She issued a citation of code violations. Returning to inspect the sewer line, inspector Martin found no rats but she did find many other violations which Speaker would have to address: rubbish, dog feces, improperly parked cars, tall grass and weeds, traces of oil in the back yard. In the winter months of 2004-2005, Martin was back to Speaker's property eight times, looking for code violations. She even wrote Speaker a ticket for failing to cut the weeds and grass that were then beneath a thick layer of snow.

Having spent \$3,000 on the sewer repair, Speaker did not have the funds to comply with all these work orders. The city also began issuing fines for "excessive consumption of inspection services." Speaker was told that she might apply for a grant from the "Neighborhood Development Alliance" to defray part of the cost. As a condition of receiving this money, she had to allow city inspectors to inspect the interior of her house.

Into the house went inspector Lisa Martin. She determined that Speaker's personal belongings constituted a possible fire hazard, that the linoleum floors were not up to city code, and the upstairs units needed a proper fire exit. In short, Speaker's home was declared unfit for human habitation.

On November 9th, inspector Martin accompanied by a St. Paul police officer posted a notice of condemnation on Speaker's front door. Speaker's son, Joe LeVasseur, tried to argue with the inspector. The police officer told him not to get involved. Even so, LeVasseur's presence was enough to intimidate these city officials and prevent the condemnation from being carried out. On the following afternoon, Martin returned with six police officers to post the notice on Speaker's door.

Legal-aid attorneys were able to stay the condemnation so that Speaker could make the necessary repairs once she received the grant from the Neighborhood Development Alliance. Joe LeVasseur, a union carpenter, helped with work on the garage. Visiting the site again, inspector Martin told LeVasseur to stop working on this project because he was not licensed with the city of St. Paul. Even so, Speaker and her son made some progress in complying with her work orders.

Meanwhile, the stress resulting from the condemnation took a toll on Betty Speaker's health. She made repeated trips to the hospital. While in the hospital for kidney dialysis, a bench

warrant was issued for Speaker's arrest because she had missed a court appearance related to the condition of her home. The eviction was finally enforced on April 25th. Speaker was forced to live with relatives.

Throughout this period, the city of St. Paul continued to issue work orders even as Speaker's two sons tried their best to bring the property into code compliance. Inspector Martin informed them that her mother's home was now city property.

Joe LeVasseur happened to read an issue of the Watchdog. He contacted its publisher, Jim Swartwood. Swartwood discussed the case with Andy Dawkins, a former state legislator who then headed the St. Paul housing-inspections department. The Watchdog ran a lengthy article on Betty Speaker's plight.

Next, St. Paul housing inspectors condemned a building owned by Swartwood. Swartwood appealed the condemnation. When a housing inspector admitted that he had found no code violations on Swartwood's property, the hearing officer dismissed the city's case. It was obviously retaliatory for the bad publicity which the Watchdog had given the city.

The pogrom against St. Paul property owners came to the attention of certain Minneapolis landlords who were experienced in fighting city government. Together, Minneapolis and St. Paul landlords carried out two picketing events at St. Paul city hall. Joe LeVasseur attended both. On November 8, 2005, St. Paul residents booted Mayor Randy Kelly out of office. It may not have been full compensation for all the troubles Betty Speaker and others had suffered; but, at least, this was a start.

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