

Slumlord to serve jail time

Darren Stern, accused of coercing renters to move, pleads no contest to dozens of violations.

By Jessica Garrison
Times Staff Writer

May 3, 2007

The president of a company accused of forcing hundreds of Los Angeles tenants to live in slum conditions will serve up to five months in jail, the city attorney's office said Wednesday.

Darren Stern, president of Landmark Equity Management, pleaded no contest Tuesday to nearly three dozen code violations at three buildings near downtown.

Jail time stemming from code violations is rare for landlords in Los Angeles, and housing advocates expressed satisfaction that "a message is being sent to slumlords."

"If there were ever a slumlord that more richly deserved to spend time in jail, I do not know of him," said Tai Glenn, directing attorney for the Legal Aid Foundation of Los Angeles, which represents many of Stern's tenants.

Stern, through his attorney, declined to comment.

The attorney, Nathan Hochman, said that his client had "cooperated fully with ... bringing his buildings into compliance and addressing the tenants' concerns" and that he is "committed to continuing along this path in the future."

The criminal charges, which include allowing leaking sewage and cockroach infestations, were in addition to a civil action brought last year by City Atty. Rocky Delgadillo and the Legal Aid Foundation. Delgadillo accused Stern's company of an organized campaign to force tenants out of dozens of buildings to raise rents to take advantage of the gentrification sweeping many parts of the city.

The city's rent-control laws limit increases to 4% a year in many buildings and make it difficult to evict people. But tenants said managers were shutting off the water and power and in some cases threatening them with violence as part of a campaign to get them to leave.

Stern's plea in the criminal case does not affect the civil case, set to go to trial later this year. Late in 2006, the judge in that case barred Stern's company from buying more buildings in the city, pending the outcome.

*

jessica.garrison@latimes.com