

Spike in 311 complaints lead to merchants removing decades-old signs to avoid hefty fines

BY VAN TIEU | NEW YORK CITY
PUBLISHED 7:32 AM ET DEC. 01, 2018

United Hardware has been serving Bay Ridge on 3rd Avenue for more than 80 years. The large awning outside was installed before Mason Sinno took over the business 30 years ago.

There was never a problem with the sign, until a couple of months ago, when the Department of Buildings hit him with a large fine.

“Close to \$8,000,” Sinno said. “I mean with all the architect fees and everything else - it adds up for a small business. It’s not easy.”

Mom and pop shops like United Hardware are in a panic across the city, particularly in Bay Ridge. There’s been a sudden, mysterious rise in complaints and violations slapped on merchants, and some lawmakers fear for nefarious reasons.

The citation for Sinno’s sign was issued because there was never a permit for it.

According to city building codes, signs larger than six square feet require a special installation permit in the interest of public safety.

Sinno, said he tried to fight it at a hearing, explaining that the sign was installed by the previous owner, but he ultimately lost and now has to pay the violation and spend thousands more on designs, permits, and installation for a new sign.

“I don’t have giant lawyers behind me that I can take and fight it like the big corporations do,” Sinno said. “I’m sure if you walk up and down the Avenue I don’t think anyone’s got a permit for their sign”

He’ not alone. Multiple long time businesses on the 3rd and 5th Avenue corridors of Bay Ridge have also been fined for host violations of old signage rules.

A spokesperson for the buildings department says it is not operating a crackdown, but that an increase in violations is linked to an influx of anonymous 311 complaints. The agency is obligated to investigate each complaint and take enforcement action if violations are found.

Over the past three years, the number of 311 complaints about business awnings and signs stayed steady around, until this year when it doubled to nearly 1900 complaints according to open data. Of the five boroughs, Brooklyn saw the largest spike of about 1,000 complaints in

Brannan said a vast majority of the signs in his district aren't a danger, instead, the real danger are the small business owners that may suffer.

"We're worried that sign companies are going out there and putting in these complaints in the hopes that these businesses will then call the sign company and say, 'Hey, can you get me into compliance?' Otherwise we don't really know what's going on," he said.

The complaints and fines have become so apparent that other local merchants are preemptively removing their signs to void penalties that could put their businesses under.

Melissa Wu, the owner of Melissa Nails, had her awning removed and replaced it with a banner after one of her family member's business was hit with a \$6,000 fine for his sign.

"I got afraid," Wu said. "I don't think I have the money for that especially now the business so low. "

Two doors down from Melissa's Nails, 3rd Avenue Dry Cleaners removed their awning, and on the next block across from United Hardware, Rainbow Hair Salon ditched their sign.

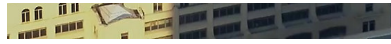
All of the signs were removed this week.

Legislators are working on bills to update the laws regarding signage, including Council Member Rafael Espinal Jr., who said East New York experienced a similar situation in recent years. Brannan is calling for a short term plan to protect family businesses.

"We're trying to say let's hit the pause button until we figure out what's going on, put some sort of moratorium on these fines, that unless the sign is in danger of falling and is a public safety hazard, just leave it alone until we figure out what's going on," Brannan said.

Merchants on 3rd Avenue they need all the help they can get.

YOU MAY ALSO BE INTERESTED IN



Iconic Watchtower sign removed from Brooklyn Heights

BROOKLYN | 11 MONTHS AGO

CHANGE REGION

CONTACT

RSS

FAQ

SITEMAP

CAREERS

TERMS

PRIVACY

CERTIFICATIONS