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Assembly passes sweeping landlord-tenant bill

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The Assembly today signed off on a bill 58-34 that would make sweeping changes to landlord-tenant laws over a series of Dem objections the legislation sought to appeal to wealthy developers over low-income renters.

The bill would increase limits on fees that landlords can charge tenants for credit checks and limit rent abatement terms. It would also limit the amount that municipalities can charge for inspections and allow landlords to include past rent on eviction notices and labor charges in billings for reasonable repairs.

Sponsors of the bill told reporters before the floor session today that such provisions are to help mitigate increasing costs for landlords.

“The landlords can’t afford to eat some of these additional costs. A lot of these landlords aren’t huge landlords. They’re making mortgage payments and property tax payments, they’re fixing their homes,” said Rep. Michael Schraa, R-Oshkosh.

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Dems, though, argued the bill was massive and would only serve to chip away at provisions aimed to protect tenants.

Rep. Amanda Stuck, D-Appleton, argued the legislation could have been split up into a series of bills.

“What this really is a list of wealthy developer and property owner desires,” she said, adding that tenants, particularly low-income ones, weren’t included in the process.

And Rep. Gary Hebl bemoaned “the loss of local control” in the bill as he berated bill

authors for seeking to protect the interests of “wealthy landlords” at the expense of tenants.

“There are bad landlords and there are laws in place to protect tenants from bad landlords,” the Sun Prairie Dem said. “This bill eliminates a lot of those rights that those tenants have.”

But Rep. Dave Murphy, a former landlord who owned two duplexes in Appleton, argued the bill would make housing more affordable by encouraging landlords to build more units, thus increasing the supply of housing.

“Folks on the other side would have you believe that more government regulation would make housing cheaper,” the Greenville Republican said. “That’s ridiculous.”

Meanwhile, a substitute amendment from co-author Rep. Rob Brooks, R-Saukville, that would make a series of tweaks to the bill also cleared the chamber.

Among the changes in the sub are a provision that would require renters’ eviction records to be publicly available for 10 years. Under the sub, if an eviction action was dismissed, it would be removed after two years.

The sub also tweaks a portion of the bill that would impose a limit on the amount of time a court can prevent domestic violence victims from being evicted from their home. Under current law, a court can issue a stay to prevent eviction while the victim waits for an emergency assistance program. But the bill would limit the court stay to five days — although the sub doubles that to 10 days.

Dems — including Rep. Chris Taylor, D-Madison — seized on that provision, saying it was “just going to make it harder for people to find housing.”

Rep. Todd Novak, R-Dodgeville, joined all Dems in rejecting the bill, making him the only GOP lawmaker to vote against it. Meanwhile, four others did not vote.

The bill now heads to the Senate.

See the vote tally.