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Tenants give Boston landlord a Christmas Bronx cheer

By Peter S. Canellos
Contributing Reporter

Boston housing activists yesterday invoked the holiday spirit to get their designated "Scrooge" to abandon a legal battle to permit landlords to stop serving low-income tenants in some federally funded housing projects.

But after a spirited encounter with David A. Smith, senior vice president of Boston Financial Group, the activists went home disappointed.

Smith refused to drop a lawsuit demanding that the government allow landlords to buy out their government mortgages and stop offering subsidized rents for low-income people.

The projects were built under a federal housing program in the 1960s and early '70s and included an option for developers to buy out their mortgages - and with them the requirement to serve low-income families - after 20 years.

But the federal government last year blocked landlords from exercising any such options until 1990. Housing activists say the law preserved 300,000 low-income housing units.

Smith, who helped organize 60 landlords to file a class action suit challenging the government, said the government is interfering with landlords' rights to make profits off their investments.

"If you eliminate the profit motive in housing, you get lousy housing," said Smith, adding that the government should pay for new low-income housing programs, rather than force current landlords to continue serving low-income tenants.

"Your motive is to pay an affordable rent," he told low-income tenants. "Our motive is a fair price for what we own."

Carrying signs depicting Smith as Scrooge and reading "We've Had It With Greed", about 30 protesters confronted Smith outside his Summer Street office.

"Dear tenants, merry Christmas, David Smith wants you evicted," they chanted, before telling their stories.

"I once was homeless, living in shelters, Diana Quinones of Lowell told the crowd, sobbing. "My son and I lived without heat, with holes in the wall. And all I can think about is in two years I'll be out there again."

Smith pledged to work with housing activists to push for more government funding, but also vowed to go forward with his lawsuit.

The protesters booed and gave him a Christmas present "to you and yours": a paper bag full of coal.