

Marin supervisors to review strategies for housing squeeze

By **Richard Halstead**, *Marin Independent Journal*
POSTED: 07/30/17

An ordinance that would prevent landlords from evicting tenants on month-to-month leases without just cause is one of the strategies that Marin supervisors will consider Tuesday when they review their progress in preserving housing affordability and preventing displacement.

A “just cause” ordinance is one of several of options that county planning staff will present to the Board of Supervisors when it meets at 5:30 p.m. at the Marin County Civic Center.

The county staff is recommending the board consider hiring an expert to facilitate the county’s purchase of affordable housing units in danger of being sold. It is recommending that the board shift funds allocated for establishing voluntary rent guidelines to a landlord partnership program that has succeeded in increasing the number of Marin landlords who accept Section 8 housing vouchers.

Meredith Parnell, a housing advocate with the Marin Organizing Committee, said county supervisors need to “expand their thinking about what can be done to protect renters here. They have done some good work. I think they could be bolder.”

In the past, supervisors have rejected the idea of rent stabilization or “just cause” eviction protections, despite hearing from planning staff that rent control has the potential to have the “most immediate and significant positive impact” toward preserving housing affordability in Marin.

The planning staff’s report to the board begins by noting that the median price for a single-family home in Marin reached record levels in April. According to Irvine-based CoreLogic, the median price for a single-family home in Marin rose to \$1.2 million in April.



The Marin Housing Authority reported it has issued vouchers to 411 people since the beginning of this year and 209 have found housing. At this time last year, it had issued vouchers to 152 people since the beginning of the year and 68 had found housing. (MIJ Photo)

“We’re hearing stories of 40 percent to 50 percent rent increases,” Parnell said, “and people afraid to complain about substandard living conditions because they’re worried about being evicted.”

“Marin is really the only community in the Bay Area that has virtually no renter protections,” she said. “Right now renters are entirely at the mercy of what people keep referring to as ‘good landlords.’ We shouldn’t have a system that is based on luck and just hoping that people will act nicely.”

SITE ACQUISITION

Supervisors held three public workshops in 2015 to discuss what steps they should take to address Marin’s housing crisis. Since then, they have focused on trying to preserve existing affordable housing through acquisition and convincing more landlords to accept Section 8 housing vouchers.

Last year, supervisors approved a \$500,000 grant and a \$500,000 loan to support the acquisition of an eight-unit apartment complex in Stinson Beach. Supervisors also approved a \$675,000 loan in 2016 to help finance the conversion of 27 multi-bedroom apartments at Piper Court in Fairfax into units affordable to low-income families.

Planning staff is recommending that the county hire a locally informed professional to help evaluate future properties for acquisition.

Leelee Thomas, a principal planner with the county’s Community Development Agency, said there are two apartment buildings with a total of about 40 affordable units at risk of being sold. She said there is about \$4.8 million in the county’s housing trust fund, which could be used for future acquisitions.

Also last year, supervisors allocated \$450,000 to a program designed to entice more landlords into renting to holders of Section 8 housing vouchers.

The money is being used for variety of purposes: to create a loss mitigation fund to compensate Section 8 landlords if their property is damaged by voucher holders; to help Section 8 tenants pay security deposits to landlords; and to help compensate Section 8 landlords for vacant periods.

An additional 55 landlords have started accepting Section 8 vouchers since the beginning of the program. So far, the housing authority has had to pay out only \$27,998 to compensate landlords for damaged units.

“That low number should give prospective landlords some assurance that Section 8 people aren’t just running rampant,” said Lewis Jordan, head of the Marin Housing Authority.

VOUCHER DATA

Kimberly Carroll, a deputy director for the Marin Housing Authority, said the authority has issued vouchers to 411 people since the beginning of the year and 209 have found housing. At this time last year, the authority had issued vouchers to 152 people since the beginning of the year and 68 had found housing.

Planning staff is recommending additional funding be allocated to the landlord partnership program stating that it “has exceeded many of its first-year goals and even a few of its second year objectives.”

The money, about \$135,000, would be shifted from a program that was going to reward Marin Housing Authority landlords for voluntarily keeping their rental prices below a certain level.

Planning staff and the housing authority are now recommending that this program be abandoned. In its report, staff states that the contemplated incentives “proved insufficient.”

“We looked to put money where money was working best,” Jordan said.

But among the other options staff is seeking direction on, the “just cause” ordinance is attracting the most attention from housing advocates.

“That is the one we’re most interested in right now,” Parnell said. “We would like the supervisors to give staff direction to move forward on that.”

The county staff report says: “Just cause ordinances have existed in California and the Bay Area since the 1980s and have recently reemerged as a tool to provide stability in the rental market.”

The report notes that “in some Bay Area jurisdictions, just cause protections are triggered only by code violations; they prevent a landlord from evicting a tenant without cause for a period of time following the submission of a formal complaint to the local agency code enforcement staff.”

Such an ordinance would not prevent a landlord from terminating a lease for valid reasons such as owner move-in, nonpayment of rent, causing a nuisance, illegal activity or any other violation of a lease agreement. It also would not prevent a landlord from raising the rent.

Four California cities have adopted just cause ordinances since 2016: Alameda, Emeryville, Richmond and Union City. San Diego adopted its ordinance in 2004.