

## LOCAL NEWS

# Novato enacts limited rent freeze for pandemic relief

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Novato has barred rental property owners from raising rent in three areas of the city deemed to have been hardest hit by the coronavirus pandemic.

Novato is the latest city in Marin to adopt a rent freeze in response to the pandemic. The San Rafael City Council voted last month to enact a nearly identical ordinance.

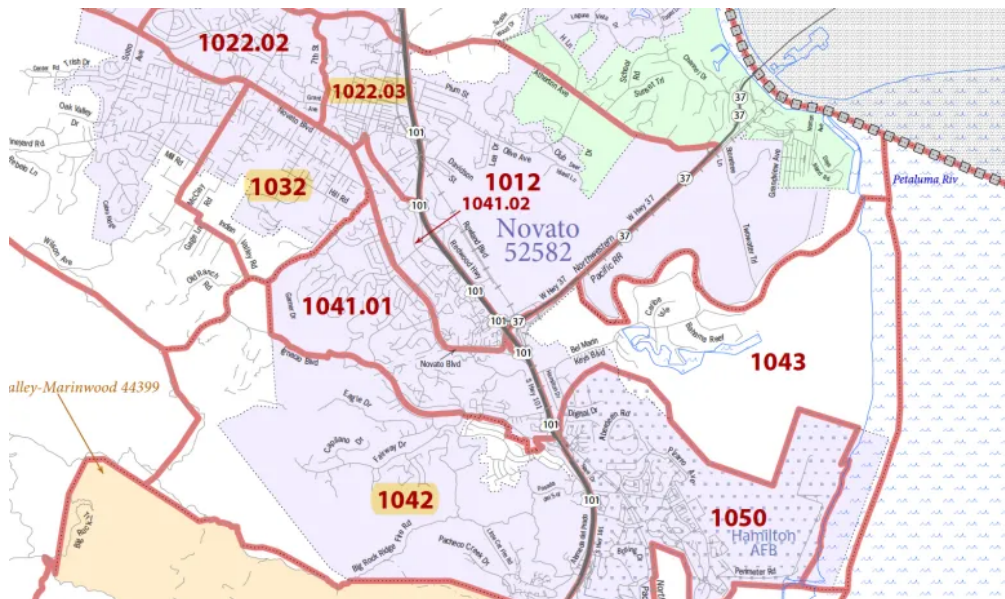
The Novato City Council voted unanimously Tuesday to approve the rent freeze in three census tracts. It is effective from Monday through the end of the year.

City Manager Adam McGill told the council the proposal is meant to reduce the chances residents will be displaced from their homes during the pandemic and limit how much debt residents will accrue.

“About 10,700 households in Marin are at imminent risk of displacement, with an estimated 8,200 children living in these households,” McGill told the council at the meeting. “So we know the risk is high, further justifying the urgency of this ordinance and its appropriateness for you tonight.”

The three census tracts affected by the rent freeze — 1032, 1042 and 1022.03 — encompass parts of downtown Novato as well as neighborhoods south of Ignacio Boulevard.





Rental properties in Novato census tracts 1032, 1042, and 1022.03, highlighted in yellow, are subject to an emergency rent freeze set to take effect on Feb. 1 and end on Dec. 31. (City of Novato)

The city selected the three census tracts based on their coronavirus infection rate and the extent of overcrowded housing. The two indicators were chosen because the funding the city and county provide for rental assistance can only be used based on these factors, McGill said.

“Both have to be present: overcrowding and positive cases,” McGill told the council.

In April and May, the county distributed \$2.9 million in assistance to renters and landlords, \$364,000 of which went to Novato, according to the city. In December, the county began distributing another \$2.8 million in rental assistance.

The rent freeze does not apply to single-family homes; properties containing only one or two residences; condominiums; mobile homes; townhomes; and in-law apartments, also known as accessory dwelling units.

Lucie Hollingsworth, a staff attorney with Legal Aid of Marin, called on the council to approve a citywide rent freeze. Predominantly non-White communities suffer the majority of overcrowded housing; hold or have lost the majority of low-income and essential jobs; are already rent-burdened; and have higher coronavirus rates than the rest of Marin, she said.

“As tenants grapple with the unknown future, we urge you to temporarily prohibit rent increases for the duration of the COVID-19 emergency for all of Novato and show that you stand for an equitable Novato,” Hollingsworth told the council.



Alex Khalfin of the California Apartment Association urged the council to reconsider the rent freeze.

“I just don’t think that having a rent freeze is the right approach to help folks that struggling to pay rent,” Khalfin said. “I think the approach should really be to maximize rental assistance funding and to go after funding that we know is going to be available. We know the state will provide additional money to the county, and we also know that it’s likely that the federal government will also provide some money.”

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**Will Houston**

