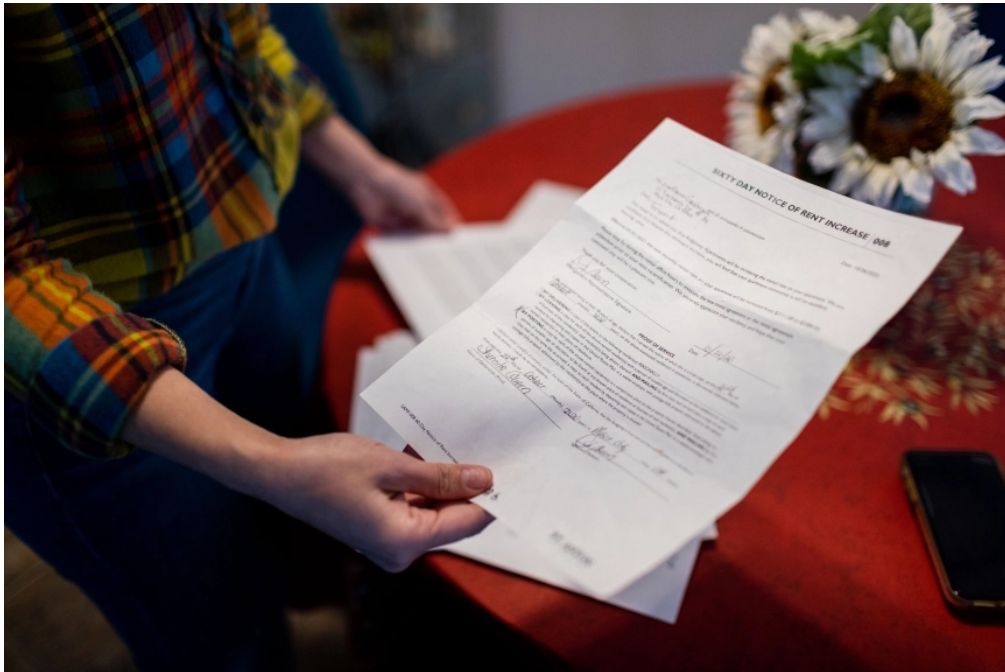


OPINION

Marin Voice: County supervisors should approve rent-increase moratorium



Lana Gasparyan holds a letter from her landlord notifying her of an increase in rent while at her apartment in Marin City, CA, on Wednesday, Dec. 30, 2020. (Ethan Swope/Special to the Marin Independent Journal)

By **SAMI MERICLE** and **MARTA VILLELA** |

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Two weeks ago at a public assembly on Zoom, a leader with the Marin Organizing Committee shared that she had recently received a \$50 monthly rent increase, in spite of having lost 80% of her work since the pandemic hit.



Another, who had just recovered from COVID-19, told his story of struggling to pay rent while dealing with sickness and disability. Another shared that, if he receives another rent increase during the pandemic, he will have no choice but to leave the county for cheaper housing.

Two cities in Marin County have recently stepped up to help renters who are struggling during this pandemic. Both the San Rafael City Council and Novato City Council voted unanimously to protect tenants from rent increases this year in a total of five census tracts between the two cities. Now the Marin County Board of Supervisors will have a chance to do the same, as it considers a moratorium on rent increases in certain census tracts in unincorporated Marin during Tuesday's video conference.

As leaders with the Marin Organizing Committee, we want to thank the San Rafael and Novato councils for their bold steps forward and urge county supervisors to follow suit.

The ordinances are a huge win for our community, as many renters in these areas are workers who have risked their health to provide essential services throughout the pandemic.

The MOC has advocated for a freeze on rent increases since last summer, when it became clear that the economic effects of COVID-19 would be leaving renters saddled with thousands of dollars of debt. Two hundred leaders from the MOC's 23 member institutions gathered on Zoom on the eve of the San Rafael City Council's vote to support this policy, and many spoke at the San Rafael and Novato council meetings.

The action from our local jurisdictions comes on top of new state legislation to provide continued protection from eviction for tenants who can pay 25% of their monthly rent, and a huge influx of emergency assistance for both renters and landlords.

The MOC wants to support not only renters but also small landlords. We can do this by keeping people housed and providing landlords with the help they need to avoid foreclosure.

However, we know that throwing money at a problem cannot solve an issue on its own. Rental assistance and renter protection policies will succeed only if tenants and landlords are educated on their rights and are able to easily navigate the pathway to accessing money. The Marin Operating Committee is eager to continue working with county officials and our local jurisdictions to make this happen.



We also urge Marin's other local jurisdictions to consider implementing an emergency ban on rent increases for one year — and for Novato, San Rafael and the county to expand their ordinances. We have heard stories from our member institutions of rents going up all over the county. Worryingly, a number of these stories are coming from designated affordable housing, which is often exempted from renter protection rules.

We cannot expect our public officials to solve these problems on their own. A vibrant democracy asks more of us.

We need an educated and organized citizenry with the power and relationships to begin a dialogue, negotiate solutions and troubleshoot issues. Representing more than 15,000 families in Marin, the MOC is committed to doing its part.

Sami Mericle, of San Rafael, is a board member of the Marin Environmental Housing Collaborative, which is a member of the Marin Organizing Committee. Marta Villela, of Mill Valley, is a leader with the Marin Organizing Committee through Saint Raphael Church.

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