

LOCAL NEWS

Marin activists seek rent freeze during coronavirus crisis

By **RICHARD HALSTEAD** | rhalstead@marinij.com | Marin Independent Journal

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Lana Gasparyan, who lives at Ridgeway Apartments in Marin City, is unemployed because of the pandemic and owes months of back rent. On top of that, her landlord has notified her the rent would increase 8% effective Friday.

“I don’t think it is right,” Gasparyan said.

Marin housing advocates agree. They’re calling on the Marin County Board of Supervisors to place a temporary moratorium on rent increases during the coronavirus emergency.

“Marin Organizing Committee is asking for a freeze on rent increases and an extension and expansion of the current rent moratorium to ensure that no one is evicted until the pandemic ends,” Pat Langley, a leader of the committee, told supervisors at their meeting on Dec. 15.

Langley, a parishioner at St. Anselm Church in Ross, said low-income residents are, in many ways, more at risk than ever. Many owe thousands of dollars in rent debt. Statewide protections are due to expire at the end of January, creating uncertainty for landlords and tenants. Evictions are now being processed in the courts.

“We hear stories from renters living in a constant state of fear about how they will care for their families if their rent is raised as much as \$50,” Langley said. “One way we can stretch these funds is to ensure that landlords don’t raise rent during these precarious times.”



Lucie Hollingsworth, an attorney with Legal Aid of Marin, said last week that her organization had received at least 20 calls since Aug. 31 from people concerned about rent increases.

“Many of those tenants are already thousands of dollars behind in rent,” she said.

Hollingsworth said renters are often forced to occupy already overcrowded homes of friends and family or move into cars and homeless encampments. She said such crowding threatens the county’s ability to control the pandemic.

Omar Carrera, executive director of Canal Alliance in San Rafael, said rent hikes at this time cause many tenants to self-evict.

“Freezing rents works for everybody, including property owners,” Carrera said. “Evictions are bad business for both property owners and tenants.”

Gasparyan said she was hospitalized three times in March with a respiratory illness that doctors believe was the coronavirus. She was unable to return to her job at an eye clinic in San Francisco after being called back from a furlough because she is a single mother and has to care for her sons, ages 10 and 13, who remain out of school.

When Gasparyan moved into her two-bedroom apartment in 2015, the rent was \$1,500 per month. Her new rent is \$2,284 per month. That amounts to a 52% increase.

The owner of her 225-apartment complex, St. Anton Capital, is allowed to continue raising the rent even though the apartments are deed-restricted to provide housing for low-income residents. St. Anton did not respond to a request for comment.

To qualify for a Ridgeway apartment, renters may make no more than 60% of the area median income, and 11 of the apartments require an income of no more than 50% of median income.

The apartments were built in the early 1990s as part of Marin City USA, a development project that replaced Marin City’s flea market with a shopping center and new housing. The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development invested \$430,000 in the complex.

St. Anton Capital purchased the apartments in 2008 using low-income housing tax credits. In addition to the tax credits, St. Anton receives redevelopment money, a portion of the property tax revenue that would otherwise go to the county and other public entities, on an ongoing basis. For example, last year St. Anton received \$418,600, said Molly Kron, a Marin County planner.



The amount of rent St. Anton can charge is limited by the government, but it is based on the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's calculation of median income for Marin County, which is revised each year.

The median income for a four-person household increased 4.6% to \$143,100 in 2020, and the year before it jumped 15.54%, from \$118,400 to \$136,800.

In addition, Kron said, "Most deed-restricted affordable housing is exempt from tenant protection policies limiting rent increases."

Nevertheless, Joby Tapia, secretary of the Marin Rental Property Association, said, "Moratoriums on rent increases and evictions are not really addressing the core issue of the problem. The core issue is that people can't pay the rent."

Tapia said what is needed is for government to provide renters with the financial assistance they need to pay their rent.

"Unfortunately," Tapia said, "it appears just one group of people, landlords, are being required to subsidize all the economic problems that Marin is facing."

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Richard Halstead | Reporter

Richard Halstead is a news reporter covering Marin County news, politics, health care, social services, Fairfax and San Anselmo.

rhalstead@marinij.com

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