

LOCAL NEWS

San Anselmo passes pandemic rent freeze ordinance

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After months of discussion, San Anselmo Town Council has approved a rent freeze for tenants financially impacted by the pandemic.

The ordinance was passed in a 4-1 vote on Tuesday and will freeze rent hikes until Dec. 31 for tenants who can prove they are unable to pay because of the health crisis. It also allows property owners to petition to the town manager to increase rent.

Last month, the council decided to separate the rent freeze from an eviction protection moratorium. It will consider the moratorium at its meeting on June 22, according to a [staff report](#).

San Anselmo Councilman Steve Burdo said he has heard stories from people who have been unable to afford rent hikes due to losing their jobs or becoming ill.

“It’s a temporary protection, and considering everything going on over this last year, this is something that is meaningful and effective,” he said.

Councilman Ford Greene disagreed. He said the county and state coverage for renters is good enough.

“It exists and what we are intending to impose is too broad and it’s not sufficiently well-tailored to people who have COVID-specific justification for the non-payment of rent,” Greene said. “Given those things, I don’t think we need to go into this. I don’t think we need to burden our staff with it.”



Not covered in the rent freeze are apartments rented for fewer than 30 days, extended care centers and governmentally subsidized homes. It also excludes detached homes and condominiums, which are protected under the Costa-Hawkins Rental Housing Act, a 1995 law that bars cities from capping rent on those types of residences.

“This is not the best policy I’ve ever seen enacted,” said Mayor Brian Colbert. “I understand Steve has heard a lot of stories, but I hardly hear about stories that emanate out of San Anselmo.”

The town’s population is about 12,500. So far, 41 out of 93 residents who requested rental assistance from the county have received a total of \$119,890 in aid. As of June 3, 40 residents were still waiting and 12 were ineligible for aid through the county program, according to the staff report.

Out of 5,219 households in town, about 24% are renter-occupied with a median rent of \$1,930, and about 41% of renters are paying more than 30% of their income, which is considered overpayment, the staff report says. The town has 340 low-income households.

Public comment during the council meeting was mixed. Pat Langley, a parishioner at St. Anselm Church in Ross, said the freeze is needed to protect essential workers and attract more people to live locally.

“Given the cost of buying a home here, renting is the only way most essential workers can live here,” Langley said. “Why would someone want to drive for hours to San Anselmo to care for children, disabled and elderly, or work in restaurants and stores?”

“On a selfish level, we need to make sure our essential workers can stay in our community,” she said. “The temporary rent freeze gives renters breathing space to return to jobs without worrying about having to find a new place to live.”

Mark Foehr, who owns an apartment complex in town, said he opposes the rental freeze.

“The proposed ordinance is unfair as it targets the wrong landlords,” he said. “There are many corporate owners of single-family rental houses in town limits. ... These are multi-billion real estate investment trusts who own tens of thousands of single-family homes throughout the state.”

“Under your ordinance, these corporate owners with deep pockets and armies of lawyers are exempt, but local mom and pop owners are not,” he said.

Burdo said he would have liked to include big corporate landlords in the ordinance as well, but they are covered by the Costa-Hawkins law.



“So we are filling the gap we can in town,” he said.

Colbert said there are not a lot of workers who live in town, but he still voted for the rent freeze.

“I’m struck by human toll,” he said. “Of course there is the human toll of the landlord who requires this income for their own daily lives. But it seems, as a temporary measure, like a small and imperfect gesture.”

Vice Mayor Alexis Fineman said the ordinance provides aid to vulnerable residents.

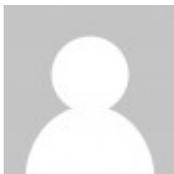
“The town has done a good job painting this with as fine of a brush as possible,” Fineman said. “It fills a hole that needs to be filled in a really extraordinary time for people in our community.”

Councilwoman Eileen Burke also supported the rent freeze, but she said the ordinance should have included an eviction moratorium.

“The whole reason of an eviction moratorium is for people who are behind on rent because a loss of income or illness related to COVID,” Burke said. “It seems obvious you need to freeze those people’s rents. They can’t pay it now. So I don’t understand how we don’t see how those two are linked.”

In Fairfax, the Town Council will consider a urgency ordinance on Wednesday to prohibit residential evictions without cause through Sept. 30, said Garrett Toy, town manager.

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