

LOCAL NEWS

Marin County extends pandemic freeze on tenant evictions

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

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Marin County has extended its eviction moratorium to Sept. 30 for residential tenants who owe back rent because of the pandemic, and several municipalities are following suit.

The Board of Supervisors voted unanimously Tuesday to approve the action. The county is racing to distribute more than \$17 million in state and federal rental assistance before a statewide emergency eviction freeze expires at the end of this month.

Maria Callahan, a housing counselor with Fair Housing Advocates of Northern California, told the supervisors that a “significant number” of Marin residents have not been able to access the funds and remain in arrears because of the coronavirus crisis.

“Many tenants and landlords are having difficulty simply accessing the portal to apply for rental assistance, and as always it is the people who need help the most who are the most challenged,” Callahan said.

Marin supervisors have extended the eviction moratorium several times since adopting it on March 24, 2020, eight days after Marin and five other Bay Area counties issued a “stay at home” order to slow the spread of the coronavirus.

“Unlike previous actions, this urgency ordinance would apply only to unincorporated areas of the county,” said Leelee Thomas, a county planning official.



Asked why the county couldn't simply renew its broader ban, Marin County Counsel Brian Washington said, "The trajectory of the pandemic has changed, lessening the need — at least for the moment — for countywide action to protect health and safety."

The state plans to retire the "Blueprint for a Safer Economy," its system of pandemic restrictions, on Tuesday. Thomas said this alters the county's position.

"The county does not have the same basis to take action outside our jurisdiction," Thomas said. "Previously, it was based on the health officer's order, which limited commercial activities."

At the supervisors' meeting, Lisel Blash, a member of the Marin Organizing Committee, said, "Renters and landlords alike need more time to access the rental assistance offered and pull their lives together."

Thomas said the county has received 1,113 applications for rental assistance so far, including 356 from San Rafael, 141 from Novato and 82 from the Sausalito and Marin City area.

"To date," Thomas said, "we have assisted 286 households with payments of \$3.3 million covering back rents for the period April 2020 through March 31."

Supervisor Damon Connolly said the relatively slow rate of aid distribution is a reason he supports the eviction ban extension.

"We have to redouble those efforts," he said.

Even more rental assistance might be on the way. The county is awaiting word on its application for another \$9.4 million through the American Rescue Plan.

In San Rafael, Mayor Kate Colin said the City Council will consider an eviction moratorium similar to the county's at its meeting on June 21.

"We are taking this step because the county will be receiving a total of \$26 million in rental assistance but, to date, has been able to distribute approximately \$3 million," Colin said. "We don't want the pace of the distribution to negatively affect folks' ability to benefit from this great program."

In Novato, City Manager Adam McGill said the council will consider a similar ordinance when it meets on June 22.

The California Apartment Association has requested some changes to the county's ordinance. It says renters should be required to submit declarations once a month stating how the pandemic has prevented them from paying their rent, instead of a single declaration.



“Given that the state is opening up in one week,” said Rhovy Lyn Antonio, a spokesperson for the association, “and economic factors may change as people return to work, jobs hire people back and vaccination rates continue to improve.”

The other changes requested are more technical. For example, the association would like the county to supply declaration forms and specify how declarations may be delivered to landlords.

At the recommendation of Supervisor Katie Rice, a subcommittee of the Board of Supervisors will review the association’s requests and determine whether there is any merit to amending the ordinance.

“The Apartment Association has, in my experience, provided constructive comment in the past on ordinances affecting their membership that improved draft ordinances,” Rice wrote in an email.

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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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