

Marin faith community rallies behind families facing huge rent increase

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Members of the local community held signs in support of a “just cause” ordinance and other Marin County rent controls. (Photo by Christina Gray/Catholic San Francisco)

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Christina Gray

Thanks in part to public outcry from the Marin County faith community, the children of some 42 low-income families in San Rafael hit with a 40 percent rent increase just as the school year was about to begin are in their classrooms where they should be – for now.



“The landlord, for whatever reason, chose to negotiate,” said Meredith Parnell a member of the Marin Organizing Committee, a network of local faith communities and nonprofits working together on issues for the common good.

Just days before the rent increase was to go into effect Sept. 1, the landlord agreed to give the tenants more time. The rent increase will be staggered over a period of just over a year, giving tenants a chance to find ways to adjust themselves to the new rent or move elsewhere.

In July, the new owner of two apartment buildings in the Canal neighborhood gave his tenants notice that the monthly rent on their two-bedroom units would leap from \$1,900 to more than \$2,700. Some families moved out as soon as they could. Those

that remained approached Legal Aid of Marin, a nonprofit that serves low-income and vulnerable residents in Marin County, in the hope negotiation with the landlord could be brokered.

Sixty-two children in the San Rafael School District were affected, according to a press release issued by the MOC on Aug. 14.

On Aug. 17, priests, rabbis and deacons from local churches and synagogues including the pastors of St. Anselm and St. Raphael parishes, stood on the steps of St. Raphael Church to call attention to the civic and moral consequences of a rental market that is one of the highest in the nation.

“How many of you are renters? Where would you come up with an extra \$700 a month?” said Rabbi Susan Leider of Congregation Kol Shofar in Tiburon, during opening remarks at a noontime press conference.

The event, which drew about 75 sign-carrying supporters including Catholics from nearby parishes and the mayor of San Rafael, was organized by the Marin Organizing Committee and Legal Aid of Marin.

The affected tenants are predominantly households of immigrant families whose members already work multiple low-income jobs to pay the rent. The tenants reported to the two agencies unsafe and unhealthy living conditions – bedbugs, mold, cockroaches and broken appliances among them – even before the rent increase, but said they avoided complaining because they feared eviction or deportation.

During the bilingual press conference, family members reported through an interpreter that their older school-age children had offered to drop out of school and work to help the family make rent.

“Whether they are immigrants or not, renters have very few rights under current San Rafael law,” said Leider. “They are entirely unprotected, living at the whim of the market. But housing is not just another commodity. It is the very bedrock of our lives.”

Marin County has no rent control ordinances and few other protections in place for renters of any income bracket, according to Parnell. A county ordinance took effect on Jan. 11 requiring landlords who want to raise the rent 5 percent or more within a 12-month period to enter into mediation with their tenants. However, the mediation is non-binding and does not prevent landlords from ultimately imposing whatever rent increase they want.

The MOC is pushing the county to pass a “Just Cause for Eviction” ordinance which would establish a set of criteria for eviction and provide stronger protection for tenants who file legitimate complaints. The Board of Supervisors are scheduled to hear from the community at an open meeting Sept. 11.

Deacon Gene Smith of St. Raphael Parish delivered a short prayer at the press conference.

“God is glorified when families have a decent place to live,” he said. “God is glorified when a child is given an opportunity to learn in school without interruption. Within our parish boundaries, some of our own families are facing the possibility of losing their place to live because of increased rents.”

Overall rental prices in Marin County are growing at an annual rate of 4.8 percent. The median rent on a two-bedroom apartment in San Rafael is \$3,360, well above the national average of \$1,180, according to ApartmentList.com. Outside of San Rafael, the price for the same size unit is even higher.

“I start this talk by including myself among renters because the face of those who rent in this prohibitively, grotesquely expensive market is diverse and varied,” said Elana Rosen-Brown, rabbi and cantor at Congregation Rodof Shalom in San Rafael.

She said Marin County is “in danger of losing its very soul” by a rental market that makes it nearly impossible for teachers, nurses, clergy, caretakers, nonprofit workers, restaurant workers and others to live in the county they serve.

“What will we become if we are just a playground for the wealthy?” she said.

“It affects everybody,” said Father Jose Shaji, pastor St. Anselm Church in Ross, who exchanged a look with Father Andrew Spyrow, pastor of St. Raphael, beside him. “If we had to pay rent, we’d be homeless, it’s that bad here.”



A young boy rests on the steps of St. Raphael Church Aug. 17 during a press conference during which Marin County faith leaders and the San Rafael mayor stood up for local families at risk for displacement or homelessness because of a 40 percent rent increase. (Photo by Christina Gray/Catholic San Francisco)