San Rafael immigrants coping with dual threats of deportation, homelessness

By Richard Halstead, Marin Independent Journal

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More than 300 people turned out for a community organizing meeting in San Rafael this week highlighting the dual threats that Marin immigrants face — deportation and loss of housing.

The session, held amid fierce winter rains, was hosted at St. Raphael Catholic Church by the Marin Organizing Committee, a broad-based network of local institutions, congregations and nonprofits, and the same group that founded Marin’s emergency winter shelter program for the homeless.

Cristina Garcia, a volunteer with Parent Services Project, said that while many Marin immigrants are apprehensive about the possibility that incoming President Donald Trump will accelerate deportations, they are already living with the daily fear of homelessness.

“Marin has a housing crisis, especially for the immigrant community,” Garcia said. “Rents are going up with nothing to stop them. An eviction can happen for any reason, or for no reason.

“I start thinking,” Garcia said. “What would be more difficult — having no home or deportation?”
The Rev. Scott Quinn, acting director of the Marin Interfaith Council, said Marin Organizing Committee members have been hearing some heartbreaking stories about how Marin’s housing crisis is affecting Marin residents.

“A mother evicted five days after giving birth,” Quinn said. “A family evicted because their special-needs child made too much noise. Rents increasing five times in just two years. Landlords refusing to make repairs, saying, if you don’t like it you can leave.”

Quinn said, “Unlike many Bay Area cities, there are no protections to stop this.”

During the meeting, attendees broke into small groups and exchanged personal stories about their own housing situations. When the meeting resumed, group leaders shared some of the anecdotes with the larger group; many of them were similar to the stories Quinn recounted.

Tenants told how they were being charged non-refundable fees of $30 to $40 just to file an application for an apartment, how their rents were increased when they complained about a burner on a stove not working, or how they were told to move if they didn’t like it when they complained about mold on their carpet.

One woman said when she tried to find a new apartment recently, a prospective landlord told her, “We have a new president; you and your people are going to be deported.”

Newly elected Supervisor Dennis Rodoni, whose district includes San Rafael’s predominately Hispanic Canal neighborhood, and San Rafael Police Chief Diana Bishop, both spoke during the meeting.

Asked by MOC leaders what he had gleaned from the meeting, Rodoni said, “That we have problems with overcrowding, problems with rent increases for no reason at all, problems with tenants requesting repairs and getting rent increases, and people getting evicted for no reason at all.”

Rodoni said he was committed to being a “loud voice” in the discussion of how best to address the housing crisis.

“We’re here to help you move these things forward and we will facilitate whatever it takes,” Rodoni said.

“The Community Development Agency is working on an ordinance for just-cause eviction, coupling it with rent stabilization,” Rodoni said. “This would ensure that landlords will not evict a renter for any other reason than violating the terms of the lease agreement and eliminate radical rent increases to push the renter out.”

On Thursday, Leelee Thomas, a principal planner with the county’s Community Development Agency, confirmed that county staff is working on a just-cause eviction ordinance and said she expects county supervisors to take the matter up sometime this summer.
Thomas said while just-cause eviction ordinances typically include an element of rent stabilization, Marin supervisors had ruled out any attempt to restrict rent hikes. Rodoni, who joined the board on Jan. 3, did not participate in that decision.

At Wednesday night’s meeting, Rodoni also said that he is open to expanding the county’s second unit and junior accessory unit programs, and would “welcome the conversation on where to build more housing, if need be.”

Bishop provided reassurance that her officers do not routinely work with U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement. Bishop said her department would only assist ICE in apprehending an individual if that person was believed to have committed a serious crime such as rape, murder or robbery.

“I think you would hope we would do that to keep the community safe,” Bishop said.

At the request of the Marin Organizing Committee, Bishop agreed to have some of her officers meet with local families over coming months to facilitate closer relations between the community and the police department.

MOC will host a renters’ protection study session at 6:30 p.m. Feb. 8 at St. Raphael Catholic Church in San Rafael.