

## Marin Voice: Protecting San Rafael tenants helps prevent homelessness

By OMAR CARRERA, STEPHANIE HAFFNER, TOM GABLE and CAROLINE PEATTIE | April 10, 2019

In the 2015 UC Berkeley report, “Canal: An Immigrant Gateway in San Rafael at Risk,” the pressures facing San Rafael’s Canal neighborhood are forecast as, “a dense, Latin American ethnic enclave ... where most households are low-income (a quarter of families fall below the poverty level) and 71 percent of residents have only a high school degree or less. The area has grown over the last 20 years, largely due to immigration: Hispanics have increased from 47 percent of the population in 1990 to 80 percent in 2013. But housing stock has not grown as quickly, owing to how built out the neighborhood is already.”



*More than 50 activists and San Rafael tenants rally on the steps of San Rafael City Hall on Monday, Dec. 12, 2018, demanding more renter protections after a new landlord of a Canal neighborhood apartment complex announced rents would raise more than 65 percent. (Adrian Rodriguez – Marin Independent Journal)*

As a consequence, “Gentrification may well occur here, given its close proximity to the planned site of the downtown San Rafael station for the forthcoming SMART train,” among other factors.

The Canal was designated as an Opportunity Zone by the State of California in 2018. Although the Opportunity Zone was designed to stimulate economic development and job creation in distressed communities, it’s not clear whether these investments will benefit Canal residents or not. In fact, there is a great fear that this investment tool could accelerate the gentrification and displacement that Canal residents are already facing. In the cities of San Francisco and Oakland, officials are clear that existing residents stand to benefit more than be harmed by new investment because they are protected by the city’s renter protections.

Not so in San Rafael. Just this fall, two entire buildings in the Canal (sheltering some 100 households) faced rent increases of 40 and 65 percent. Even when the owner rescinded rent increases, replacing them with no-cause eviction notices, the risks

were real. Residents elected not to pursue litigation with an uncertain outcome, and instead negotiated for time to plan for their families and another year's stability for their children to remain at school. After that, however, their ability to stay in San Rafael — or even in Marin County — is uncertain at best.

Opportunity Zones, the SMART train, limited housing options in Marin, all reflect public policy decisions. Public policy can also protect current residents. In other words, public policy created the market conditions affecting the Canal, and it has just as much of a role in supporting Canal residents. Racial and ethnic minorities, families with children, and people with disabilities — all groups that the Fair Housing Act was designed to protect — suffer disproportionately from the lack of renter protections.

In the last three years, San Rafael has been an example in the county for its efforts to end the chronic homelessness in Marin. Strengthening tenants' rights will complement these previous efforts, reduce housing instability and prevent homelessness. It just makes sense that this would have a longer-term stabilizing effect on the community.

San Rafael has the historic opportunity to enact strong renter protections to protect its current residents and its diversity — a renowned heart and soul of Marin County.

We urge the city to enact protections — as most other Bay Area communities have — that will:

1. Ensure that landlords who do evict tenants do so only with a good reason.
2. Prevent landlords from using rent increases as an alternative to eviction. In other words, give renters security and stability of tenancy that homeowners enjoy so long as they are responsible and pay their bills.
3. Provide relocation assistance to tenants to offset costs to them of gentrification-driven displacement.

To make these protections real, support legal representation for tenants facing eviction, just as San Francisco, Oakland, Hayward, Fremont, and many other Bay Area cities have done in recent years.

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