

The Mercury News

Marin County weighs pandemic rent freeze in 2 census tracts

By Richard Halstead | Marin Independent Journal | February 7, 2021

The freeze would be temporary, expiring on Dec. 31. It would apply to census tract 1330 in West Marin and census tract 1290 in Marin City. The West Marin census tract includes Dillon Beach, Tomales, Marshall, Point Reyes Station and Nicasio.

Marin County supervisors will vote on an urgency ordinance to implement the freeze when they meet at 9 a.m. Tuesday. According to the ordinance, the two tracts were selected because they have a high incidence of coronavirus infection and residents there live in relatively crowded conditions.

The ordinance says the pandemic “has disproportionately impacted historically marginalized and under-resourced communities.”

“The disproportionate impacts of COVID-19 have only reaffirmed the inequalities that exist in the county and have highlighted the urgent need to pursue bold, collaborative solutions that place equity at the forefront of our actions,” it says.

Both census tracts have higher infection rates than 70% of the county’s other census tracts. Tract 1330 has the highest infection rate in the



The Marin County Civic Center (Frankie Frost/Marin Independent Journal file photo) Marin County might follow in the footsteps of San Rafael and Novato by freezing rents in some census tracts.

unincorporated county. White residents comprise 81% of the tract and Latino residents comprise 12%.

In tract 1290, Latino residents comprise 26% of the population, Black residents comprise 23% and White residents comprise 29%.

“The proposed ordinance barring rent increases will protect renters, who are disproportionately people of color, against displacement,” Leelee Thomas, a Marin County planner, wrote to the supervisors in her staff report.

Latino residents, who make up 16% of the county’s population, have accounted for 55% of the coronavirus cases and 13.7% of the deaths from the disease. Black residents, who make up 3% of the population, have accounted for 1.9% of the cases and 3.8% of the deaths.

Asian residents, who make up 6% of the county population, have accounted for 3% of the coronavirus cases and 9.2% of the related deaths. White residents, who make up 71% of the population, have accounted for 32.7% of the cases and 72.5% of the deaths.

Last month, San Rafael froze rents in two census tracts that include the city’s predominantly Latino Canal neighborhood. In tract 1122.01, Latino residents comprise 89% of the population; in tract 1122.02, 67%.

Novato followed suit a week later, freezing rents in three census tracts that have high coronavirus infection rates and overcrowded housing. The Latino population in those tracts range from 16%, the countywide average, to 33%.

“If passed, this moratorium will keep our essential workers housed and prevent struggling renters from falling deeper into debt,” Sami Mericle, a representative of the **Marin Organizing Committee**, wrote in an email.

The committee had lobbied the supervisors to freeze rents on the entire county for the duration of the health emergency.

Alex Khalfin, a spokesman for the California Apartment Association said, “The Marin Board of Supervisors is chasing the wrong solution. The challenge in Marin County is the accumulation of unpaid rent resulting from COVID-19, and Marin County’s failure to meet its state-mandated housing production goals.”

Joby Tapia, secretary of the Marin Rental Property Association, said, “The majority of our members are acting in a kind and neighborly fashion and they haven’t been raising their rents. The issue — as we’ve been shouting from the rooftops — is a lack of housing. The Board of Supervisors is continually kicking the can down the road hoping somebody else will take care of it instead of working on the actual solution.”

The rent freeze would not apply to single-family dwellings, condominiums and apartments built after 1995 because of a state law that prohibits rent control on such properties.

The California Tenant Protection Act of 2019 limits yearly rent increases in Marin to 6.1%.

On Jan. 12, the Marin County Board of Supervisors approved a countywide moratorium on residential evictions for nonpayment of rent linked to pandemic-related financial hardship. Thomas, however, said that action was negated by Senate Bill 91, which was signed by Gov. Newsom on Jan. 29.

SB 91 extended a statewide moratorium on residential evictions caused by the pandemic to June 30. The law requires tenants to pay at least 25% of their owed rent by June 30 to avoid eviction.

The state's restrictions to prevent the spread of the virus have left many people without work. The measures have hit the hospitality industry particularly hard, leaving many low-wage restaurant and hotel workers unemployed.

In her report, Thomas wrote that unemployment rates for low wage earners in Marin increased more than 40% between Jan. 1, 2020, and Oct. 15.

Thomas said 10,700 households in Marin are at imminent risk of eviction with an estimated 8,270 children living in those households.

In addition to the threat of displacement, many households are accumulating a growing burden of rental debt. California households have accumulated an average debt of \$6,953 during the pandemic, according to a study published by the Federal Reserve Bank of Philadelphia in October.