

Dick Spotswood: Rent-control ordinances roil politics in Ross Valley

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In recent decades, except for the occasional city and special purpose district brouhaha, Marin's political life has been stable and predictable. Now, Ross Valley has exploded into political warfare including a potential recall, voter referendum over divisive municipal actions, fiercely contested city council elections and an anomaly, a normal race for county supervisor.

It's only in the campaign for the seat as the District 2 representative for Ross Valley, Larkspur, Kenfield and southern San Rafael that calm prevails. San Anselmo Councilmember Brian Colbert and past Kentfield School District Trustee Heather McPhail Sridharan are engaged in thoughtful, issue-based campaigns to determine who'll succeed retiring Supervisor Katie Rice.

Elsewhere, emotions are hot. The topic which ignited this firestorm is local rent control. California already has a statewide cap on residential rents. California's Attorney General Rob Bonta explains, "The Tenant Protection Act caps rent increases for most residential tenants in California. Landlords cannot raise rent more than 10% total or 5% plus the percentage change in the cost of living – whichever is lower – over a 12-month period."

The Legislature enacted the compromise between tenant activists and residential real estate owners. The latter ranges from corporate landlords to neighbors who purchased a two- or three-unit residence to provide retirement income.

California law allows cities and counties to enact more stringent rent-stabilization ordinances limiting annual rent increases even further. It's a proper question as to whether this seemingly benign move is a wise long-term idea.

In Marin, the impetus for enacting more stringent local rent control comes from the Marin chapter for the Democratic Socialists of America. The DSA is "focused on a campaign to win rent control in Marin." As classic socialists,

authors on the website expound that, “Capitalism is a system designed by the wealthy elite to exploit working people for their own profit.”

People have been arguing over the merits of capitalism (the greatest wealth-building system ever invented), socialism and European-style capitalism (with a high social safety net) ever since Karl Marx sat in a London public library writing “Das Kapital.”

The DSA is not a political party with registered voters. The public has no idea which local officials are socialists unless they voluntarily disclose, as does Vermont Sen. Bernie Sanders. I would compare socialists with members of the Sierra Club or the National Rifle Association – they are all citizens groups passionately advocating for their ideology.

That’s their right. It’s also the voters’ right to negatively react when the DSA persuades local elected officials to adopt their agenda. That’s happening now in Fairfax and San Anselmo.

Fairfax Town Council members made a bold and perhaps politically foolish decision to adopt stringent local rent stabilization and “fair eviction” ordinances promoted by the DSA. It “caps annual rent increases at 75% of the regional consumer price index. The annual adjustment cannot be less than 0% or greater than 5%.”

The upshot is that citizens organized under the name “Rescue Fairfax” (ed: MarinResidents.org and KeepFairfaxFairAct.org) gathered sufficient registered voters’ signatures to place a referendum on November’s ballot to revoke the rent-control law.

If rent stabilization is repealed in Fairfax, which is regarded as Marin’s most progressive town, it’ll have statewide ramifications. An effort is also underway to gather voters’ signatures to recall two members of the Town Council – Stephanie Hellman and Lisel Blash. Rescue Fairfax is campaigning to defeat the other three council members: Mayor Barbara Coler, Chance Cutrano and Bruce Ackerman, in November’s election.

In San Anselmo, on a 3-2 vote (with Alexis Fineman, Tarrell Kullaway and Steve Burdo voting yes; Mayor Eileen Burke and Brian Colbert voting no), the Hub City adopted its own tough rent-control law. Locals (ed: supported by MarinResidents.org) then gathered 1,500 valid signatures in just three weeks to qualify a repeal referendum for November's ballot.

The political lesson is when such controversial issues arise, wise council members should push to place the matter on the ballot themselves. That allows voters to make the final call and avoids the divisiveness of a referendum. Ultimately, it allows voters to make the decision based on the proposition's merits.

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