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# Initiative proposes rent control in National City



Paradise Creek apartments, an affordable-housing project on Hoover Avenue in National City. (Nelvin C. Cepeda / San Diego Union-Tribune)



By **David Hernandez**

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**A**n effort is underway in National City to place a rent control ballot measure before voters in the November election.

The proposed measure would cap annual rent increases at 5 percent and establish protections for tenants against arbitrary and unfair evictions.

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The measure, which would authorize the regulations through an ordinance, is similar to others proposed or enacted elsewhere in the state.

A coalition of community groups that put forward the local measure gathered at Kimball Park on Saturday to promote the initiative and kick off efforts to collect signatures.

The coalition — National City Families for Fair Housing — has six months to gather 2,225 signatures to make the measure eligible for the November ballot.

The proposal would link annual rent hikes to changes in the consumer price index, which measures the prices paid by consumers for goods and services, with a limit set at 5 percent.

It also would enact rules for evictions. Under the ordinance, circumstances that would allow a landlord to remove a tenant include failure to pay rent, lease violations and plans to take the unit off the rental market.

The measure also would establish an independent, five-member board that would administer and enforce the rent control rules. The City Council would appoint the members to four-year terms.

Economists generally say rent control laws reduce the incentive to build new homes and discourage landlords from caring about maintenance or improvements, reducing the quantity and quality of housing.

“I can understand the reasoning for it, because with rent skyrocketing across the county, there's this desire to control rent,” said Alan Gin, an economics professor at the University of San Diego. “The problem with rent control ordinances in the past is that it creates shortages in housing.”

That’s a concern because “we need more construction to get out of the problem,” he said, referring to the issue of affordable housing.

Proponents of the local measure said the regulations are necessary to avoid excessive rent increases that could displace lower- or middle-income households and lead to gentrification.

Nearly 70 percent of National City’s population of about 61,000 residents are renters.

According to the latest U.S. Census Bureau American Community Survey data, median rent in National City increased 16 percent between 2015 and 2016 — to about \$1,140. Although the rent in National City is the lowest in the county, the city’s median household income is also low — at about

~~\$43,000~~  
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The share of households that use at least 30 percent of its income to pay for rent is about 60 percent, according to the U.S. Census Bureau data.

Paola Martinez, of the National City Families for Fair Housing coalition, said that under current conditions tenants are moving away from National City, as far south as Tijuana. She said that is a major concern for the coalition.

“What we want to do is stop displacement and gentrification,” she said. “We see this (measure) being a solution to prevent greater displacement in the city.”

About 15 cities across the state have rent control laws on the books, including San Francisco, Oakland, Los Angeles and Santa Monica.

The topic of rent control came up Monday during a workshop in which city staff gave a presentation to the City Council on a variety of housing issues. As part of the hours-long workshop, acting Deputy City Manager Alfredo Ybarra gave an overview of the types of rent control laws enacted elsewhere in the state.

Following the presentation, more than a dozen residents and stakeholders addressed rent control, with about half in support.

Peter Valleau, the vice president of SVN Asset Advisory Group, a San Diego-based commercial real estate agency, said he has seen the negative effects of rent control in San Francisco, where his adult son lived before he moved to Seattle.

“I was disgusted by the (living) conditions,” Valleau said. “The landlord had no incentive for upkeep.”

Carol Kim, community engagement director for the San Diego County Building and Construction Trades Council, disagreed. The council owns and operates the National City Park Apartments, an affordable housing complex on D Avenue.

She said her organization plans to add 160 units as part of the first phase of a redevelopment project.

“We don’t believe we won’t see redevelopment,” Kim said. “That’s just false. We’re doing it ourselves. We believe in investing in our community.”

The coalition in National City, which formed about a year ago, has joined a state-wide effort led by tenant groups that seeks to place a measure on the November ballot to repeal the 1995 Costa Hawkins Rental Housing Act, which sets rules on the rent control policies cities can establish.

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Martinez said the measure proposed at the state level has collected more than 400,000 of the 550,000 signatures it needs to be eligible for the ballot.

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