



February 27, 2017

Dear Oregon Legislators:

I am a professor of History at Lewis & Clark College and I am also a landlord. I have lived in Southeast Portland for 20 years. I own a few single-family houses in Southeast and Northeast Portland that I bought with borrowed money to serve as my retirement fund.

I am well aware of the expenses that landlords must incur to renovate and maintain their properties. I am also aware that some tenants are not responsible, fail to pay rent on time, disturb the neighbors and generally fail to keep their homes clean or abide by the terms of their lease. However, in my six years renting to people in Portland, the overwhelming majority of my tenants have been responsible and we have maintained good relations.

As a landlord, I appreciate the ability to terminate a lease for irresponsible tenants who break the agreement. I also understand that all landlords are renting their properties to make money, not as a charity. I am no exception. Nevertheless, the needs and desires of landlords need to be balanced against the needs and interests of the community, which includes renters.

The legislation being proposed for rent stabilization or control seem like reasonable measures to both protect tenants from steep rent increases and at the same time leave in place many protections for landlords to earn a fair profit from their rentals. Just think about the phrase “No-cause eviction.” On its face, an eviction without cause seems unfair. People who live in a house should have rights to remain there provided they adhere to the terms of the leases they agreed upon. If a landlord wishes to move into the property or sell it that should not obliterate the rights of tenants.

In Portland we face housing instability and a crisis in homelessness. As a landlord, I believe that it is in the interest of the community in general to address this problem by not contributing to housing insecurity through exorbitant rent increases or no-cause evictions. The burden of solving the housing shortage should not fall on landlords, but neither should we shirk our responsibility in contributing to the solution, or at the least in not exacerbating the problem.

It is well established that the only long-term way to solve the housing crunch is by building more housing. There may be creative ways to encourage private developers to do so or by encouraging landlords to build ADUs, but there will be no substantial change unless we invest large amounts of public money into building affordable housing.

In the meantime, we as a community need to address the housing crisis in our city and state. Capping rent increases at five percent a year with an exemption for people doing renovations strikes me as reasonable restrictions while providing a fair return on investment. My salary increase has been more like 2 percent a year, and my guess is that most working people are lucky to have any salary increases. Reasonable people may disagree on what is a fair rate of return, but certainly there should be some limits, and 40-100 percent increases should be prohibited.

Finally, I wanted to comment on the terminology used to describe landlords. I believe that large real estate corporations from outside the state only have an interest in making profits for their investors. Local landlords, however, live in the same communities as our tenants and therefore we have, or should have, a common interest in the well-being and sustainability of the entire community.

Although local landlords and tenants often have quite personal interactions, the description of local landlords as “Mom and Pop” glosses over the business relationship that is at the center of owning a rental. In addition to being hetero-normative (why not Mom and Mom or Pop and Pop?), the familial language smacks of paternalism where landlords are seen as parents of childlike tenants.

Let’s recognize that landlord-tenant relations are essentially economic and should be regulated just as we regulate many aspects of the economy. In Oregon, Payday Lenders cannot just charge whatever interest rate they like. Property tax assessments are also highly regulated at no more than 3 percent a year. Why can’t we use a similar logic to regulate and cap rent increases.

I know that many of my fellow landlords might think I am crazy to cede rights and protections for landlords, but ultimately we all have to balance our personal interest in profits against the costs to our community. Isn’t that the Oregon way?

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Elliott Young". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Elliott Young
Professor of History
Director of Ethnic Studies