
Rent stabilization offers low-income families a fighting chance (Opinion)



Demonstrators call for a fight against high rents and low wages as they stage a sit-in at the doorway of the governor's office at the Capitol on Thursday, Feb. 18, 2016 in Salem. (Molly J. Smith/Statesman-Journal via AP)



By **Guest Columnist**

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on February 22, 2017 at 7:00 AM, updated February 22, 2017 at 7:03 AM

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By Charlie Harris

For 20 years, I worked for an organization that developed affordable housing for farmworker families and other low-income families in rural communities throughout Oregon. Having a safe, stable and affordable place to live provides families and individuals with a foundation for a better life.

Today, we are in the midst of a statewide housing crisis that has been long in the making. All of the tools we have - public financing, grants and loans, public subsidies to lower the rent, operating subsidies, rental assistance, progressive land use and landlord tenant laws, - are fully utilized, and yet have been inadequate to solve the problem.

If we agree that the lack of affordable housing is a problem, then "rent stabilization," (which limits the amounts by which rents can increase), is intended to prevent displacement, to slow the rate and speed of rent increases, and to protect middle and low income households from the extreme rent increases that today's market will apparently bear. Is it *the* perfect solution? No.

Should it none the less be considered an additional tool in a community's strategy to address the affordable housing problem?
Yes.

Academic studies can support either side of the argument. Some say that limiting rent increases to 5% or 10% will discourage the development of additional units. But when penciling out their projects, developers don't typically assume that rents will increase by more than 5% in any case. Some say rent stabilization will lead to responsible landlords pulling out of the market. But as "mom and pop" landlords, my wife and I have owned a couple of rentals, and have seen no reason to raise the rent by more than 5% at any time over the last 20 years. Maybe there are isolated instances where a larger rent increase is justified, but rent stabilization laws would allow the landlord to make that case.

Can rent stabilization work? After reviewing the studies and based on his own experience, Tim Collins, an administrator of New York City's rent stabilization ordinance, concluded that the rent stabilization program there has been "the single greatest source of affordable housing for middle- and low-income households," according to an [April 2015 piece in Pacific Standard](#). This from someone who, by his own admission, was surprised that it didn't have the negative effect that many predicted.

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And, as an economics professor said [in the same article](#), rent stabilization provides the added benefit of neighborhood stabilization: "Long-term tenants who contributed to this being a desirable place to live have a legitimate interest in staying in their apartments. If we think that income diverse, stable neighborhoods, where people are not forced to move every few years (are worth preserving), then we collectively have an interest in stabilizing the neighborhood."

Rent stabilization by itself is not intended to solve the problem. It is intended to prevent displacement, to slow the rate and speed of rent increases, and to protect middle and low income households from the extreme rent increases that today's market will apparently bear. For Oregonians with low incomes, it's a chance we can't afford to give up.

Charlie Harris is a retired housing developer who served as director of CASA of Oregon, a statewide nonprofit that builds affordable housing for farmworker and low-income families in rural communities. He lives in Newberg.

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21,000 reasons to give rent-stabilization policies a chance (Opinion)



Protesters march through the Capitol Building, in Salem, Ore., on Thursday, Feb. 18, 2016. (AP Photo/Timothy J. Gonzalez)



By **Guest Columnist**

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on January 20, 2017 at 7:00 AM, updated January 20, 2017 at 7:03 AM

By Kayse Jama and Rev. Joseph Santos-Lyons

It's no secret that communities across Oregon are experiencing severe housing shortages and extreme rent increases. Last year, **over 21,000 kids in Oregon's school districts** experienced homelessness. That means 21,000 kids worried about where they and their parents would sleep at night, rather than focusing on school. This year, Oregon legislators will have an opportunity to lift the statewide prohibition on rent stabilization, a step that would help keep families in their homes and set children up for success.

Over the decades, communities have tried a range of strategies to help ensure families and kids have access to the basics - including an affordable place to call home. Just after World War II, cities across the country tried something called "rent control" in response to housing shortages. In this bygone era, there were firm caps on rent for an indefinite period of time. This kind of rent control had negative side effects, and has mostly vanished, except for on TV sitcoms and a handful of remaining units in New York City.

To combat today's housing crisis, Oregonians are looking for innovative ideas that can keep families in their homes. **[More than 150 jurisdictions across the country](#)** have adopted some form of rent regulation. These policies are carefully designed to help prevent displacement while creating economically stable neighborhoods and allowing landlords to receive a fair rate of return on their investments. Both urban and rural communities can craft policies that work for their local housing markets.

We have a responsibility to consider new ideas to meet today's challenges. Oregon renters are some of the most rent-burdened in the country. The impact of this crisis falls hardest on communities of color, seniors, children, and other vulnerable populations. Low-income as well as working-class people are struggling. Being priced out kills dreams and can end lives.

Repealing the prohibition on rent stabilization would restore local control, allowing individual communities flexibility to design policies that meet their unique needs. **[A 2016 poll conducted by DHM Research](#)** found a majority of Oregonians support rent stabilization to help curb rents that are rising too fast for families to keep up. Modern rent stabilization policies include a mix of options to stabilize families, support a healthy housing market, and retain property rights for landlords.

We can do better to ensure all Oregonians have a safe, stable place to call home. We know we must increase the supply of housing. We also need solutions to prevent massive rent spikes that are pushing families out of their homes, their neighborhoods and, too often, into the streets.

A stable home provides kids with the foundation for success in school and life, and our state's future depends upon the success of our children. We support the efforts of the Stable Homes for Oregon Families Coalition, along with dozens of organizations representing thousands of Oregonians across the state, working together to solve the housing crisis. Learn more at **www.stablehomesor.org**.

Kayse Jama is executive director of Unite Oregon. Rev. Joseph Santos-Lyons is executive director of APANO.

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There are a lot of misconceptions lately about rent control. A good article explaining what it is and involves appeared in Money magazine in 2015 (find it at <http://time.com/money/4062981/rent-control/>).

At present only four states (California, New York, New Jersey and Maryland) and the District of Columbia permit rent control. In these states, this is limited to certain cities that adopt rent-control regulations. These regulations vary from city to city, depending on the intent of the control desired.

No, rent control doesn't affect all rentals. In most cases it doesn't affect small-scale rentals (like duplexes, a rental house or a spare room) or many new apartment complexes. And no, it doesn't prevent rents from increasing or put an ultimate cap on rents. Rather, it can focus on certain apartment buildings or locations. It can prevent massive and sudden rent increases while still allowing gradual increases over time. It can increase transparency in the rent increase process. And it can help to prevent rental price-gouging.

Rent control doesn't have to be scary or competitive. It can be sunsetted via a time limit if the intent is for problem-solving or a limited application. Rent control is, pure and simple, what the states and cities make it to be.

David Brooks, a conservative columnist with The New York Times, recently told PBS News that although he supports a capitalistic market supply economy, he acknowledges that without moralistic controls, such a system can lead to greed and price-gouging.

The implication is that with no controls for a supply-and-demand system, overpricing will create significant problems until such time as pricing finally stabilizes. This, of course, may take months or years (which doesn't help the emergency of the current situation).

One comparison I've heard that is analogous to Portland's affordable housing dilemma is the EpiPen pricing situation. Numerous articles have alleged the manufacturer (Mylan) made price hikes not based on costs. When one reads of rents in the Portland area increasing from 10 to 50 percent in a year's time just because of supply issues, it is easy to assume that price-gouging is at play here, too.

Oregon House Speaker Tina Kotek's proposal for the state to allow rent control and prevent no-cause evictions is neither out of line nor new. If done correctly, rent controls will help to deal with the immediacy of rent-gouging, yet still allow landlords the ability to raise rents, although gradually. And remember, rent controls typically do not impact all rentals, but only those specifically identified as problematic.

Coupled with the promotion of affordable housing, rent controls can help to provide both new and stable housing for people at all economic levels, which is something that land-use planning in Portland has sadly failed to accomplish.

David Krogh of Southeast Portland is a retired land-use planner. He is a part-time consultant and does planning-related writing and volunteer work. Email: kroghplanning@gmail.com.