

Reviving Rent Control

Housing
Activists say "The time is ripe"

Like Rip van Winkle's awakening after a 20-year sleep to find the world had changed dramatically, local activists are working hard to revive rent control after two slumbering decades.

Bob Lamonica, David Silva and Linda Lemaster joined forces to combat the climbing cost of living in Santa Cruz. They are wrestling with issues that have stayed out of the spotlight since City Council member Mike Rotkin helped place rent-stabilization initiatives on the '78, '79 and '82 November ballots. All of his efforts failed to command the number of votes required for implementation.

"Santa Cruz is ripe for rent control," Lamonica says, referring to the steady erosion of employment wages in relation to the cost of living.

"Virtually every industry is regulated," Lamonica adds. "Moreover, the housing industry has shown itself incapable of self-regulation."

It takes little effort to verify advocates' claims — just thumb through last week's Sunday classifieds in the Santa Cruz County *Sentinel*. The rental listings run the gamut from \$675 for one room in the Santa Cruz Harbor area, to \$550 for a small one-bedroom apartment, which is the only relatively affordable offering of its kind in that day's listings. From there, prices skyrocket to a \$900-a-month studio in Seabright, a \$1,400 one-bedroom apartment in East Santa Cruz and a \$1,600 two-bedroom (one bath) house in Santa Cruz.

Housing affordability and availability for students is no less dire. Even though UC Santa Cruz offers the student-friendly Community Rentals Program for off-campus housing, the song remains the same.

Statistics compiled by UCSC Community Rentals for January through March indicate that the average rent for a room in a household was \$440 a month, a studio fetched \$592 a month, a two-bedroom house averaged \$1,160 a month and a four-bedroom house rented for about \$1,957 a month. Wanda Amos, coordinator of UCSC's Community Rentals Program, speculates that this summer's rental prices will soar even higher, and expects to see between 200 and 250 students every day.

"There has to be an ethical, responsible response to the rental market crisis," Amos says.

The group that simply calls itself Rent Control Santa Cruz has responded by launching its petition drive May 20 against Lamonica's depiction of "rent gouging" in Santa Cruz.

Volunteers will be campaigning until Nov. 5 to collect the 3,723 signatures (10 percent of the city's registered voters) required to reserve a place for the advisory measure on the November ballot.

If approved, the measure-turned-mandate will be administered by a Rent Stabilization Board, whose members will be appointed initially by the City Council and elected thereafter by registered Santa Cruz voters.

For more information on the rent control petition drive and upcoming meetings, call 457-2670 or 423-4663.

—Marta Vaisberg