

# Call for rent control grows

As housing costs rise, more residents seek government action



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

Capitola resident Jay Campos decided to leave his one-room home of eight years when the rent reached \$850 a month. He moved this weekend.

## Local relief measures have history of failure

By **HEATHER BOERNER**  
SENTINEL STAFF WRITER

Jay Campos works two weeks of every month just to pay rent, and he's fed up.

The 52-year-old's blood pressure has shot up along with the monthly payments on his Capitola studio apartment. Rent was \$650 in the fall, and he expects it to hit \$900 in June now that he's been asked to pay utilities, too.

Even now that he's found a cheaper apartment near Moss Landing, he often wakes up in a cold sweat, wondering how he will be able to pay rent, he said.

For Campos and other rent-strapped residents, frustration is turning to a renewed call for rent control.

"I refuse to be squeezed out," he said. "And the sooner we start organizing for rent control, the better. I'm going to get as many people as I can to follow me."

For the past two months, residents regularly have attended Santa Cruz City Council meetings, urging council members to institute rent control. Last week, the largest union in the county, the Service Employees International, discussed joining the fight.

But even in liberal Santa Cruz, the first local city to enact a living-wage ordinance, rent control is no easy sell. Opponents have

defeated rent control three times, and in 1999 supporters couldn't gather enough signatures to put a rent-control measure on the ballot.

Because of the past failures, many area progressives say they are unwilling to take up the fight. And with such strong opposition, any split in the city's politically powerful progressive community could end the fight before it begins.

"Politically and strategically, I think it would be a blood letting," Councilman Ed Porter said to a group of UC Santa Cruz students Thursday. "But I agree entirely that it should happen."

Frustration with the area housing market is clear all around. UCSC students, who are guaranteed one year of on-campus housing, say they start worrying about where they will live their sophomore year halfway through their first year.

"Long-term (solutions) are great, but I'm only going to be here for the next two years," said UCSC student David Harbaugh. "We need something now."

California Highway Patrol trainees have been forced to live in area hotels because they can't find affordable apartments. Last year, four Santa Cruz High School teachers quit mid-year and left the area because of housing pressure.

"There's been a burst of interest in rent control over the last

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## THROUGH THE ROOF

### About the series

Through the Roof is an occasional series on the housing crisis in Santa Cruz County.

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■ State law takes the teeth out of rent control — **PAGE A9**



# Rent control: As housing costs keep rising, more residents call for government action

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few months," said Santa Cruz resident Bob Lamonica, a rent-control advocate who spearheaded the failed rent-control signature drive two years ago. "The difference now is that rent control in 2001 is a middle-class issue."

County Supervisor Mardi Wormhoudt said statistics favor rent control in Santa Cruz. There are more renters in the city than in other parts of the county, she said.

But none of the backers — the UCSC students, the teachers, Lamonica — appear organized enough yet to lead the charge.

Lamonica, who regularly attends San Jose council meetings to lobby for rent control, said he hasn't been active on the issue locally for a while. He hopes interest from local unions will change the climate, though, and propel rent control back into the spotlight.

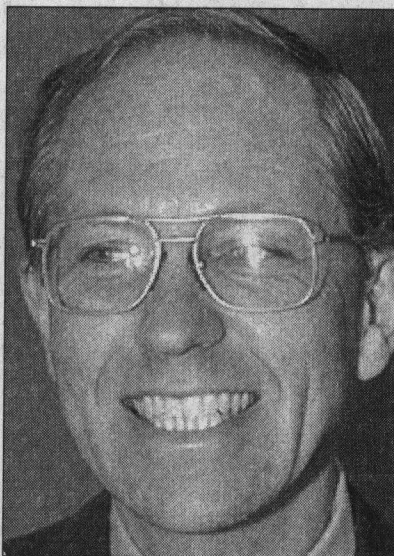
## A political split

The Santa Cruz City Council, meanwhile, has no apparent plans to grab the issue as its own.

That's due in part to sure opposition from the business community. Progressives themselves are torn about the feasibility of rent control and state law isn't favorable to the kind of rent control backers say would be most effective.

Three Santa Cruz City Council members, Vice Mayor Christopher Krohn, Porter and Mark Primack, met Thursday with a group of 10 UCSC students to discuss what issues the students felt were important, and the conversation revolved almost entirely around housing.

Students wanted to know what city leaders are doing about a housing climate that sees students spending \$600 to share a room with another student on campus while their friends are paying \$900 per month for a room down-



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CITY COUNCIL

town.

"I know it won't happen while I'm here in the next year-and-a-half, but how plausible is rent control?" asked junior Susie Vilayvanh, who organized the meeting for the Student Union Assembly.

Primack said past rent-control efforts have been "disastrous," and could lead to rental homes being sold by owners seeking to avoid rent control.

Porter said he supports rent control, but that it has failed so miserably in the past he's hesitant to pursue it again.

Santa Cruz residents attempted to pass three rent-control ordinances in the 1970s and early 1980s. Each ballot measure failed by a greater margin than the previous one.

And there is still fierce opposition.

## Organized opposition

The Tri-County Apartment Association opposed Santa Cruz rent-control efforts in 1978, 1979 and 1983, and Jeffrey Dennison, the association's gov-

ernment-relations manager, said the group would do it again.

"The goals are noble — affordable housing, et cetera — but it works counter to those goals in reality," he said. "After it was instigated in San Francisco, the number of housing units actually dropped. If you want prices to drop, it's a matter of political will to make the tough decisions."

Krohn expects any rent-control discussion to polarize local progressives. Because of that, any move toward rent control will have to come from residents, he said.

"The council is kind of holding its breath to see what the community does," he said. "There would have to be a groundswell, and everyone would have to get together on this — residents of Beach Flats would have to work with UC Santa Cruz students, would have to work with teachers, would have to work with cops. Everyone would have to pull together."

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