

## **San Francisco Rent Control - Much More About 'Progressive' Power than Tenants' Rights**

*By Karen Crommie, SPOSFI member*

Among the most politically influential groups affecting housing policy in San Francisco are the Tenderloin Housing Clinic (THC) and SF Tenants Union (SFTU). Over the years, both have burnished their reputations as champions of tenants' rights and affordable housing.

So it's most revealing, though it comes as no surprise to us, when a prominent "progressive" admits that rent control is really all about power.

In a May 14, 2008 article in the online [www.BeyondChron.org](http://www.BeyondChron.org) ("SF's Skyrocketing Condo Conversions"), Randy Shaw, director of THC, frankly admitted that maintaining the number of rent-controlled units in the city is really about progressive voting power. Oh, sure, there was some mumbling about maintaining "economic diversity," but that mask quickly dropped when he took a hard look at the numbers.

Citing the incidence of condo conversions since 1998 (4,147), Shaw warns, "Over time, a tipping point could be reached where the number of rent-controlled tenants is too small to significantly impact political decisions." Per Shaw's figures, condo conversions are occurring at double the legal ceiling of 200 per year. This, he reasons, is due to the fact that two-unit, owner-occupied buildings are exempt from the conversion cap. The exemption was originally created because people who could not afford a single-family home in the city could afford to buy a two-unit building. The rationale for the exemption, Shaw says, is no longer valid and should be overturned: "Duplexes in neighborhoods like Noe Valley, the Castro, Haight Ashbury, and the Marina now routinely sell for more than the cost of a house in other city neighborhoods. In other words, the policy for exempting owner-occupied duplexes from the condo limits no longer exists." But Shaw overlooks the fact that even if a duplex costs more than a single-family home, it is the income from the second unit that permits a person of lesser means to own in San Francisco.

When those duplex units then sell as condos, twice as many people become homeowners. Home ownership is a good thing: for those involved, for children, for neighborhoods, and for the city as a whole. To sacrifice an opportunity for home ownership at the altar of Progressive Power is shortsighted, selfish, and eventually, crippling for the future of San Francisco.

The great number of market-rate units now on the drawing board is even more troubling to Shaw and his compatriots. Building more market-rate housing will exert a downward pressure on rents in general, lessening the need for tenants to cling so tenaciously to their rent-controlled units and giving them the freedom to move up. But this is no consolation to Shaw: more market-rate renters in the city simply further dilute the power of the progressive voting bloc.

But, one might ask, what about the mandatory 12-17% “affordable” units required of all new construction? Shaw says it doesn’t provide nearly enough “to help families struggling to stay in the city.” I suspect, however, just as with rent control itself, it’s not the struggling families that concern him as much as the prospect of seeing the tenant power base being whittled away. And if Shaw's article is the harbinger of an upcoming ballot measure bringing two-unit, owner-occupied buildings under the condo conversion cap, which I suspect it is, the “tenants rights” activists will need all the votes they can muster.

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