

Letter from the Editor's Desk (Rent Control Watch: The Dramatic Saga of Alameda)
by Kathy Lautz

Landlords in Alameda headed off at the pass a relocation payment and just cause ordinance in front of the City Council on February 1st. Landlords turned out in force to speak to the City Council. Also on the docket was consideration of a moratorium on development in the West End.

Landlords turned out in force to speak to the City Council. By the time the meeting ended ... the proposed ordinances were dead in the water.

Alameda has been hit with a sequence of events that would leave any community reeling. In early May, 2004, the Alameda Housing Authority was informed that its Section 8 funds had been retroactively cut by HUD. This put a large number of Section 8 vouchers in jeopardy, for landlords as well as for tenants. The City, scrambling to avoid the possibility of a large number of potential evictions, dipped into its dwindling reserves to cover the shortfall. Many Alameda landlords banded together, at the request of the housing authority, and lowered rents for tenants with Section 8 vouchers, in order to keep people from losing their homes. Alameda was one of the few cities in the Bay Area that was faced with this budget shortfall, (eventually over \$2 million), so the story received extensive press coverage, far beyond that warranted by the low profile Alameda usually maintains. Although the need for low income housing grows ever on, the City was able to see to it that at least no one was evicted because they lost their housing voucher.

There was little time to take a breather. In July, 2004, the owners of the 615 unit Harbor Island Apartments gave 386 eviction notices to all the tenants of the complex in preparation for a complete renovation of the property. (The remaining 229 units were already vacant.)

This complex, by far the largest in the City of Alameda, is just outside the gate of the former Alameda Naval Air Station. It was built as off-base Navy housing, and although not owned by the Navy, the complex did perform the function of base housing. Military housing is never built to high construction or aesthetic standards to begin with. When the base closed in 1996, the property was purchased by the current owners, and by all accounts rented at the low end of the market structure.

These "mass evictions" attracted wide press attention to Alameda all over again. The evictions were perfectly legal, but the tenants wanted more time. The original notices were for 30 or 60 days, however, the owners graciously extended those evictions to 60 and 90 days.

The tenant activist groups, responding to the impact of this large scale community dislocation, sprung into action. Tenants were organized and encouraged to believe that they were being discriminated against in their search for new housing, according to a flyer distributed by a housing rights group.

Into this confluence of events Sentinel Fair Housing decided that it was time to do a discrimination audit in Alameda. The results of this study, conducted at a time when tensions were at their highest, showed a distressingly high rate of "subtle discrimination" among landlords in Alameda. This study was conducted with volunteer surveyors. The actual study data has still not been made public, although the executive summary has been published with great fanfare.

The Harbor Island eviction was like stirring up a hornet's nest. Tenant activists from all over the Bay Area descended to organize the tenants, protest, march, and disrupt City Council meetings.

Unfortunately, landlords themselves, still reeling from the shock of the accusations of racism, weren't paying close attention to the tenant activities at City Hall, where things were brewing that were bad for landlords. The tenant groups in the name of "keeping this from ever happening again" in Alameda, were proposing a relocation payment requirement for properties over 40 units. The proposed ordinance included strong "just cause" language.

On December 22nd, the City Council put on the agenda that they would consider a draft ordinance to the above effect at their January 4th meeting. The timing of this seemed to be an

attempt to fly under the radar, and get City Council to pass an ill-conceived ordinance before anyone realized it.

Fortunately, a sharp-eyed former City Council member, Barbara Kerr, became aware of the situation and notified the AOA office in Alameda. We realized that quick and decisive action was required to stop this ordinance. We did a mailing to Alameda property owners alerting them to the situation and asking them to attend the City Council meeting. The item was postponed once, so we had to do another mailing.

It worked! We packed the City Council chambers. Approximately 30 landlords spoke up against relocation payments, just cause eviction, and rent control in general. You could see the mood of the Council change right before your eyes. By the time the meeting ended, at 1:00 am, (thank you very much), the proposed ordinances were dead in the water. The Council members were asking the few remaining landlords (and yours truly, who stayed until the bitter end) for suggestions as to what they could do instead.

The fight is not over. The fight is never over. I have learned from this situation that we must do two things: pay close attention, all the time, and be prepared to show up and defend our rights as rental property owners.

I have also been studying the websites of the tenant activist groups, from which it is possible to glean all sorts of interesting things. For instance, the stated strategy of these groups is to effect rent control legislation on a community by community basis, rather than at the state level. The hope is that we won't notice until it's too late.

In Alameda we have a little bit of a breather now, and we must proceed to help the City Council craft legislation that will make this city a better and safer place for tenants to live. Chiefly, we will advocate that there are sufficient laws on the books that if implemented correctly, could keep the rental housing stock in good condition while avoiding any aspect of rent control. We will continue to strongly advocate for property owners and against rent control.

There is a new battle brewing in the Bay Area, this time in Richmond, a city of 100,000 situated on the waterfront, near the bit oil refineries. Richmond has its share of problems, and is generally ignored by the major media, unless there's a gruesome murder or disastrous fire or chemical spill. Rent control would be a disaster there. We, the AOA, will join the fray and speak loudly. We will find local property owners and get them to speak. We are bound and determined to reverse the tide of rent controls in this area.

We have to do our part. Readers of this magazine are most likely the responsible landlords that maintain their properties and treat their tenants fairly. We must encourage landlords who do not have this business plan to change, before we all are forced to change by onerous and ill conceived legislation. We'll keep you informed, but can only do so monthly. Sometimes this isn't fast enough. Please take it upon yourselves to keep a sharp eye out for property ownership issues at your City Council. Please call our office if you hear anything about rent control coming up in your city. Working together, we can win this battle.