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Rent Control May Be Heading Back to California Ballot

Housing Advocates' Initiative for 2020 Follows Other Legislative Moves in Play



Moves to boost housing affordability through rent restrictions and density changes -- including near transit stops -- are being debated by state and local lawmakers in California and other states. Photo: Flickr

A division of advocacy group AIDS Healthcare Foundation filed papers to get apartment rent control back on the California ballot after a prior election measure was defeated by state voters last year.

Rent control is seen by advocates as a desired response to rising housing prices amid dwindling affordability in multiple cities. But moves to restrict rent hikes also have the potential to upend multifamily investment and development fundamentals not only in California but other states where similar actions are being considered, including Colorado and New York.

Advocates associated with Housing is a Human Right, a division of the Los Angeles-based healthcare foundation, filed papers with the California Attorney General's Office for what would be a state ballot measure in 2020 after it gathered required signatures. It must still be certified for ballot consideration.

Among other elements, the proposal would allow for rent control on buildings more than 15 years old while exempting owners of two or fewer homes. It would restrict rental rate increases on a vacated unit by no more than 15 percent over three years, in addition to other increases already permitted under local ordinances.

The rent control advocates' move follows earlier legislative proposals aimed at making rental housing more affordable through changes in development planning laws. For instance, state Sen. Scott Wiener's [Senate Bill 50 proposes boosting allowable housing density](#) near public transportation.

Wiener's bill, currently before the state Senate's Governance and Finance committee, aims to change zoning codes to allow residential projects with greater height and density near bus, rail and other forms of public transit.

It also includes affordable housing requirements and related tenant protections for transit-friendly projects, though opponents have said the state measure could usurp cities' decision-making rights, among other concerns.

Similar programs, related to issues [such as density and parking requirements](#), have already been enacted or are being considered in California cities such as San Diego, San Francisco and Berkeley. California Gov. Gavin Newsom has also called for boosting state incentives to encourage cities and counties to raise allowable housing density for projects providing affordable units.

Opposed by developers, landlords and other business and economic development groups, rent control in California has generally not fared well in recent state and local elections. In November 2018, California voters [rejected Proposition 10](#), which would have expanded rent control by removing certain statewide restrictions enacted more than 20 years ago, prohibiting local rent controls on units built after 1995.