

Renters Write



Volume 33, Number 1 **Santa Monicans for Renters' Rights**
Serving the Needs of All Santa Monica Residents Since 1979

April 2023

From 1979 to Today: Our Legacy of Protecting Renters in Santa Monica

by Denny Zane, SMRR Co-Chair

Because of SMRR organizing and support from Santa Monica voters, we won the nation's best rent control law forty-four years ago on this date: April 10, 1979.



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Because of SMRR organizing and support from Santa Monica voters, we saved our rent control and lowered the annual rent adjustment when Measure RC was approved last November.

Before the last election, the City Council majority was ready to put a measure on the ballot that would have devastated our rent control, possibly making it unconstitutional.

That is, they were ready until SMRR started organizing and more than 1000 Santa Monica renters sent emails to the City Council saying, "Take your hands off our rent control!" Then they backed down.

SMRR is here today forty-four years later, ready to carry the banner of Santa Monica renters into every election – and we know how to win. But we cannot do it without your help. **We rely upon you, SMRR members, for financial support to keep our efforts going.**

We are asking each of you who knows how important our rent control law is to join SMRR, or renew your membership, and consider making a donation of \$50 or \$100 or even more. Visit www.smrr.org/donate.

As our record shows, SMRR is a very good investment.



The Builder's Remedy In Santa Monica

by Denny Zane and Michael Soloff, SMRR Co-Chairs

You may have heard the rumor about the “Builder’s Remedy” and wondered what it is. You may have heard that the “Builder’s Remedy” may enable over 4000 housing units (80% market rate) to be built in Santa Monica without application of our local building standards, thus at far greater heights and densities than local standards would permit.

Unfortunately, there is truth to this rumor. Fundamentally, it is a truth created by the State of California. They imagine by doing so they are enabling “solutions” to our affordable housing crisis.

But, now, it is our local crisis. We are threatened with this “solution” even though our local building standards and housing programs have been shaped to enable our city to more than meet our State allocations of market-rate housing and to have the most productive affordable housing program of any city in California, while still creating an authentic urban vibrancy and protecting our beach town intimacy.

The State imposed this remedy even though at that time the approved and pending projects that comply with local building standards already would produce 139% of the entire 2021-2029 State allocation of market rate housing. The new “Builder’s Remedy” projects by themselves would produce another 117% of that 8 year market rate housing allocation. By contrast, approved, pending, and “Builder’s Remedy” projects combined would produce less than 30% of the 2012-2028 affordable housing allocation.

The question is when will the State show a real commitment to creating affordable housing?

The State drastically cut affordable housing funding in 2012 and has never restored it despite repeatedly acknowledging the desperate need for such housing. Yet it was the purported failure to demonstrate adequate land for affordable housing that the State claimed principally triggered the “Builder’s Remedy”. Santa Monica has shown its commitment to actually create affordable housing by allocating public land, and by passing both the original and new Measures GS to fund affordable housing. We must demand that the State end its hypocrisy and provide matching resources to Santa Monica for affordable housing, rather than simply using lip service about affordable housing as a way of further upzoning the City for market rate housing.

Senate Bill 466

by Anastasia Foster, Rent Control Board Chair

The SMRR Steering Committee has endorsed SB466. Short of creating any changes to vacancy decontrol, SB466 by Senator Aisha Wahab, D-Hayward, would simply expand the quantity of existing housing stock that could come under the current form of Rent Control, if a local jurisdiction like ours exercised the will of the voters to do so. This would provide predictable and clearly defined rent increases, processes and protections to the tenants of buildings built after 1979 and those in buildings that are 15 years old or more on a rolling basis, depending on which date a city chooses to draw the line.

Currently, Costa-Hawkins freezes the ability of Santa Monica and other early adopters of Rent Control to move forward with the times and bring more units under the Charter, stopping it at buildings built in or before 1979. Senator Wahab's SB466 would change that.

Rent Control is Still Here, Because SMRR is Still Here: Please Donate Today

SMRR's 44-year journey protecting renters in Santa Monica has only been possible because of your unwavering commitment to our mission. Your membership dues empower our work to build a stronger community and strengthen renter protections. This is why paying your membership dues is crucial - we can't do this alone. **Your membership dues have a huge impact and help us to keep the momentum going. We need your support now more than ever. Please donate today.**

**Please donate today! Visit:
www.smrr.org/donate
Thank you for your support!**



Forever SMRR

by Rufus Baker, SMRR member

Next time you mail a first-class letter (and we all still do, even if less often), consider the very real connection between SMRR and the “forever” U.S. postage stamps.

When I first came to Santa Monica in 1959, our two bedroom northside apartment rent was \$65 a month. And postage was 3¢ for cards, 4¢ for letters.

Over time, first-class stamp rates went up, to 5¢, 6¢, 8¢, 11¢, 18¢ – and from there I lost track. It always was a nuisance to stand in line at the post office to buy a roll of 3¢ stamps to bring our postage up to date – or worse, put two of the old stamps on an envelope.

Here comes the SMRR connection.

In 1979, the year that Santa Monica voters approved rent control, Ruth Yannatta was elected as a SMRR councilmember. In the 1980s, as Ruth Yannatta Goldway, she became Santa Monica mayor and a powerful voice for renters’ rights.

Later, she was appointed to the Postal Regulatory Commission. While there, Ruth had the brilliant idea of issuing “forever” stamps so postage of old denominations still could be used when rates went up without the inconvenience or expense of buying extra stamps or doubling old ones.

So all of us who buy stamps and mail letters benefit from the ideas of SMRR as applied to the U.S. Post Office. Hurrah!

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My Ongoing Commitment

by Sue Himmelrich, SMRR member and Former Mayor

Let me first answer the questions everyone asks. Do I miss Council meetings? No. Do I miss the reading? No. Do I miss the drama? Emphatic no! But do I miss the myriad of opportunities to make Santa Monica a better community and hearing from the public every two weeks (and virtually every day as Mayor)? Maybe a little.

But there are many ways to work to make Santa Monica better. SMRR has been my home since before I was even on Planning Commission. I first showed SMRR my PowerPoint demonstrating that the Village Trailer Park project as originally approved by Council provided less affordable housing than the legal minimum, and SMRR’s support prompted a new City Council to require a legally sufficient project. During my ensuing decade on Planning Commission and Council I could always count on SMRR as the first and loudest voice for affordable housing, conservation of rent control housing, resisting hyper-gentrification, and renters’ rights.

My new role as an unelected, unappointed activist will allow me again to advocate and agitate in my own unconstrained voice. We have lots of housing work to do at every level of government, and SMRR’s platform and grassroots network should be home base for that work in Santa Monica. The pandemic hampered our ability to launch planned projects, e.g., organizing tenant meetings in buildings and eviction court watch at the courthouse. I look forward to helping to launch those projects and more before next election season.



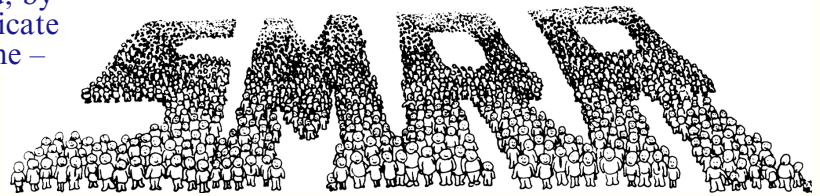
Many Stones: United We Win

by Genise Schnitman, SMRR member

In the words of the old union song, “many stones can form an arch, singly none, singly none.”

This newsletter lets us rally our renter community for the struggles ahead.

As a volunteer organization, locally funded, by its members, SMRR may seem to communicate with our membership mostly at election time – but lots of important policy, strategy, and renter protection work is ongoing.



Starting in December and for a year to follow, the Mayor of our city will be a landlord, Phil Brock. This will coincide with a threatened “review” of rent control, initiated by Brock last year. Our housing stability, our household budgets, and perhaps even our ability to remain in Santa Monica may be at risk.

We can – and must! – protect ourselves.

Campaign finance reports indicate that the landlord Councilmembers up for reelection in 2024 (Brock as well as Oscar de la Torre) have enjoyed the backing of organizations opposed to the interests of renters. As candidates they pretended to be harmless to our progressive values, but their actions in office tell another story.

First, City Council negotiations for new senior staff were leaked, in clear violation of written confidentiality agreements, yet the landlord-led Council refused to investigate.

Then, abusing its appointment authority, the landlord-led Council enfeebled the Public Safety Reform and Oversight Commission, and banished our SMRR co-Chair from the Housing Commission. They packed the Downtown Santa Monica Board with wealthy commercial property owners in seats meant for local residents.

Last summer, in the wee small hours of a Council meeting, the landlord-led Council floated a scheme that would have meant the end of rent control as we know it. SMRR staved that off, barely, but now we face having rent control “reviewed” under a landlord Mayor.

Our best defense against the threat of such a rent control “review” may be to hold the landlord Councilmembers accountable for the damage they’ve already done, and to let them know that renters are watching and waiting -- and are able to vote them out in 2024.

Over seventy percent of Santa Monicans are renters. “Drops of water turn a mill, singly none!” We were all safer in our apartments when SMRR enjoyed a clear majority on the City Council. We must get there again.

--- Genise Schnitman moved to Santa Monica in the mid-80s from an East Coast city that also had rent control, and joined SMRR to continue her social justice activism. She walked precincts, assembled walk packets, placed doorhangers in the early a.m. hours before Election Day, made GOTV calls, and eventually joined the Steering Committee. She continues to view keeping renters secure in their housing as key to maintaining the diversity and vibrant progressive values that make Santa Monica special.