

Members of the County Council

I am writing to you to express my support for Expedited Bill 22-22, Landlord - Tenant Relations - Limitations on Rent Increases. Like previous emergency rent control measures, I think it is needed to stem an acute crisis that the county and its residents were not prepared for, and that many are being hurt by.

Let me get this out of the way. Many of the concerns raised about the bill and the message it sends to landlords, developers, and the rest of the housing industry are valid, and I assure you supporting the measure is not a decision I come to lightly, frankly I've gone back and forth on my feelings about it. Still, given the way the county did not seem to have a plan to address rent spikes after previous emergency rent stabilization measures expired, and the number of people at risk of immediate displacement, I think this measure has the potential to do a lot of good in the short term, while giving the county time to come up with a more comprehensive, long term solution on rent policy that the council, the executive, and we as a county, have failed to do to this point. We can't keep doing emergency measure after emergency measure and call it a plan. We need to stem the bleeding and figure out what to do to address the issue in a more durable way, both by coming up with less strict, but permanent rent stabilization policy, and by making it easier to build more homes so landlords have less leverage over their tenants.

As I have testified before, and discussed elsewhere, both the benefits and costs of rent control are very real. I know that some of the recent uptick in rent is likely due to landlords playing catch up after earlier emergency measures, and I do, like I suspect most of you do, worry about the message it sends if temporary measure after temporary measure is passed on end, becoming de-facto permanent policy. I have wrestled with my feelings on this bill for a few weeks now, but at the end of the day, I think rejecting this measure risks overcorrecting in the short term in order to prevent longer term damage. Again, it's an understandable instinct, but I worry doing so wouldn't strike the right balance.

Accordingly, I think it would be best if you, (and though a bit outside the scope of this testimony, potentially the councilmembers that follow you) use the six months this bill would provide to begin the groundwork on more moderate, permanent rent stabilization, something that would exempt new buildings for 10-15 years and provide a decent buffer above inflation to prevent price gouging, while allowing the flexibility, particularly in newer buildings to allow landlords to remain profitable, keeping an incentive for more housing to be built, and help control prices through competition itself. We obviously need more housing, and need to do the zoning reform and other measures to do it. That's a more "durable" solution, but needless to say, that relief isn't coming in the next six months.

I supported both past emergency rent control measures and I am glad they passed, but the county did not have a plan of what to do when they ended, and we are seeing a shocking number of double digit rent increases. If some different, slightly higher percentage increase than

4.4% being allowed is more feasible, I can see the value in being flexible there. I am aware that landlords have costs they must pay, and, our system being what it is, profits to be made and investors to reimburse, that isn't to be disregarded, but getting into that business, in a scale large or small, has inherent risks that they signed up for, and most landlords are better positioned to take this six month hit than their tenants are to handle some of the shocking rent increases we are seeing around the county.

I won't sit here and pretend that none of my motivation here is personal, nor do I think that's a shortcoming. Though not a renter myself, I have friends at risk of being priced out, and through my advocacy, know of any number of less fortunate people that are suffering more immediate crises.

If nothing else, the council should pass this law, and work with incoming council members to signal what direction the county plans to go when the legislation expires, to give both renters and landlords a clearer picture of what the future will hold. I think a lot of this cost run up comes from people not being sure what is coming next, and we dropped the ball on addressing this in a strategic manner. This bill gives us a chance to avert an immediate crisis, while we work on a more comprehensive solution.

It's not an easy decision, I know that, but I think it's the right one. People will be helped and hurt no matter which direction you go. That's the case with every law that is or isn't passed. Legislating is not an easy burden to bear, but it is one that elected members of the council chose to carry. At the end of the day, all I can ask is that you remember that, and do what you think will do the most good here, though obviously I hope these words sway you in my direction.

Thank you,

Michael English
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