

A Commission for Renters in San Antonio?

by Kayla Miranda

Everyone remembers the first place they called home as an adult. Most of us have rented. Maybe it was the freshman dorms at your university. Perhaps it was an apartment with a few of your friends. Possibly a family member's rental house or just a room in someone else's home. There is a sense of pride when you sign that lease for the first time. When they hand you your own set of keys. Independence. Freedom. You are your own person. No longer reliant on your parents. The joy you feel furnishing your place, your way. When I got my first apartment, I couldn't stop smiling, even when I was paying bills. Because it was mine. That feeling fades with time. As the pressures of adulthood set in, reality bursts that happy bubble. We shake it off, we take it in stride. We decide that this is life and we just have to deal with it. I mean, our friends and coworkers all have similar issues, right?

In June of 2019, Councilman Roberto Trevino of District 1 entered a Council Consideration Request (CCR) "For the creation of a City of San Antonio Renters' Commission comprised solely of residential renters from different backgrounds to advise the City Council on matters related to affordable housing accessibility, transportation, green and other public spaces, land use, renter laws/rights, public health and safety, education, economic growth, and life in San Antonio."

A commission for renters? For those who know me this is a dream come true. You can simply google my name + 'SAHA' (San Antonio Housing Authority) and find a treasure trove of articles on housing issues. These problems are not limited to one single group of renters, but to all renters. How many of you for one reason or another, had to pay rent late? Do you remember the shock and dismay of the accumulated late fees? What about maintenance? I remember one complex I lived in had a leaky sink. The maintenance man came in and used duct tape to "fix it". An acquaintance once told me that her landlord spent the insurance check from the home she had been renting for 8 years. The owner then hired his cousin to do the repairs at a cheap rate and it caused an electrical fire. Her landlord then tried to blame her and wanted her to pay for the damage.

Have you ever had a landlord come into your place unannounced? Or change the rent mid lease? One house I lived in refused to return my \$900 deposit even though I paid a professional cleaning crew and returned the property to move-in ready

condition. We have all had our rental nightmares. One thing renters consistently see is that landlords and managers have all the power. We have little to no recourse for any type of complaint. Retaliation is often a discouraging factor for most residents.

Nelson Mandela said it best, "As long as poverty, injustice and gross inequality exist in our world, none of us can truly rest."

Not all landlords are bad. Not all renters are good. There will always be a mix. But does this mean renters should not have the same resources at their disposal as property owners? Shouldn't we have a say in policies that affect us? If we cannot afford to own property, does this make renters less important than those who can afford to own?

A city cannot make policy that is in violation of state or federal law. There are many state laws that lean in favor of landlords. So what can a commission for renters do? In an interview with Councilman Trevino, I asked some of these questions. "This addresses a structural inequity in our city. Renters are not represented. This gives renters a voice, they need a role in policy." I couldn't agree more!

There is a lot of support for a Renters' Commission. One of the most debated subjects is who should be appointed to the board and by whom?

Councilman Trevino stated there will be 11 members, one person appointed by the city council member for each district and one person appointed by the mayor. This gives each commissioner a direct line with their representative and allows for accountability on both sides. Who should be appointed? That is the discussion that can make or break this commission. We need a board consisting of only renters. Who better to ask than the source themselves? Would you require a man to be on a commission for women? Would you ask a Caucasian what it's like to be a person of color? You can, but are they able to fully understand something they do not directly experience? It would be a conflict of interest at best.

This stance has been met with a wall of opposition from real estate investors, landlords and property managers. A call to action by the San Antonio Board of Realtors (SABOR) filled with false information meant to instill fear in property owners, ruled a town hall in February 2020. SABOR affiliates demanded the commission have realtors and property owners, as well as renters. However, I question how effective a commission can be if this happens. Every public meeting considering the Renters Commission so far has been bombarded with apartment associations, property owners, developers and employees of these groups. The renter's voices were



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drowned out. The point of the proposed commission is to give a safe space for their concerns to be addressed. This reminds me of the myth that followed Marie Antoinette. In the story, a French soldier approached the queen and informed her that French subjects had no bread. She supposedly replied, "Let them eat cake." This callous remark made her a hated symbol that fueled a revolution. Such offhanded comments are often heard by landlords. For example, "If you can't afford the rent, work harder."

Census data collected in San Antonio for 2013-2017 shows the wealth gap between renters and land owners. Some of these statistics are:

- Median household income - owners make \$65,435 annually compared to \$35,155 for renters.
- Education: 34% of owners are college educated but only 23% of renters are. This has huge implications for what kinds of jobs and salaries are available to renters, and thus impacts where they are able to live, if they can pass down wealth to their families and access to healthcare
- Only 23.5% of owners experience at least one Physical or Financial Condition vs 49% of renters that do. This is defined as: 1) lacking complete plumbing 2) lacking complete kitchen facilities 3) 1.01 or more occupants per room (this classifies apartment as 'overcrowded' according to American Community Survey (ACS) data or 4) paying more than 30% of your income on rent
- Out of all San Antonians who take the bus to work, 69% are renters and 30% are owners. Policies that impact public transport are really policies that impact renters
- 5.2% of renters ride the bus to work vs 1.6% of owners that ride the bus to work.
- At minimum wage in Bexar County, you need to work 90 hours weekly for market rent
- 58.5% of SA population are owners and 41.5% are renters [but we have seen the trend in recent years that renter numbers are increasing - this is not yet shown on the census data]

The sad truth is that housing advocates have been on the front lines of truly affordable housing for decades, but it took a pandemic for the nation to realize just how broken this system is. These are not new problems; they have only been exasperated in the



Protestors call for a stop to evictions which have risen during the pandemic.

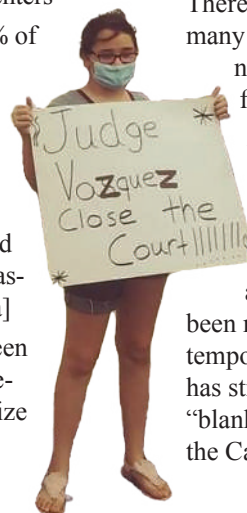
past 6 months. Millions face evictions, while our country is still whirling from the effects of the Covid-19. Of the 1,373 evictions filed in Bexar county between March 27 and June 30, 2020, seventy-two cases were in violation of the Cares Act. How many were families? For example, If each unit had a family of four, that would mean 288 people faced eviction during a moratorium on evictions. One covered property performed lock outs on 50 units, leaving the tenants locked out of their homes during Stay Home Work Safe orders by the city.

If this can happen while

Federal Law is protecting tenants, imagine what can and does happen while there are no restrictions.

Many non-profit groups have been organizing around housing. From protests to strongly worded petitions, there are people out there fighting for renters. One such group is Right to the City, who supports the Cancel the Rent campaign. In this movement, anyone who makes a monthly payment on the property they live in is a renter, including owners with a mortgage. Eviction moratoriums are ineffective, rent still accumulates. The tenant then faces a balloon payment due once the stated period is over with no relief. This is widely supported by advocates. The City of San Antonio has one of the largest Covid-19 emergency assistance programs with \$52.5 million set aside from federal and city funding. As of September 18, 2020 the entire fund has been committed. City Council approved an additional \$24.1 million on September 17th, but added several restrictions.

There are many who do not qualify for this program for various reasons. Funds are quickly disappearing and the situation has not been resolved. The new CDC temporary halt for evictions has strict regulations. It is not "blanket coverage" as was with the Cares Act. You must fill out



Kayla's daughters joined their mother in protesting evictions and declaring that "Housing is a human right!"

the proper forms and declaration. Visit trla.org or call 888-988-9996 for more.

Franklin D. Roosevelt said, “The test of our progress is not whether we add more to the abundance of those who have much; it is whether we provide enough for those who have too little.” With a looming housing crisis at our door, we will surely be tested. A renters’ commission in San Antonio will be a great aid in that measure. Evictions have been on the forefront of many renters’ minds in this pandemic. To owners, this is a piece of land with a building on it. A source of income, a business. For a renter, this is home. This is where you make memories. Build a life. Watch your children grow. Family barbecues and Thanksgiving dinner. Where your child takes their first steps or you send your teenager off to college. It’s where you raised your pet, proposed to your partner. It offers a safe haven, shelter against not just the elements and a pandemic, but the outside world as it is. It is the center-piece of



The sign in Spanish reads, “Displacements (evictions) are violence!”

your life. Even if only for that year lease. Housing is a basic human need. Individuals who wish to gain from those needs must be held to a higher standard. People before profit.

It is imperative for the renters of San Antonio to find their voice. We need to be strong. Take a stand. One of the best ways to do that is to call, write or email your city council representative and let them know you are in support of the proposed Renters’ Commission with only renters on the board. Another

way to get involved is to fill out the survey on saspeakup.com or speak at public comment and during town halls. Renters make up almost half of this great city. Let’s show them what San Antonio is made of!

BIO: Kayla Miranda is a Housing Justice Advocate and Organizer in the Westside of San Antonio. She is the mother of 4 kids and an Alazan/Apache resident.

6 LA VOZ DE ESPERANZA · OCTOBER 2020 · VOL. 33 ISSUE 8 · **Trump Wants You On The Sidelines**

Continued from Page 3

ized in the past are included in the recovery plan.

Here in Texas, COVID-19 has disproportionately taken Latino lives. In fact, Texas is the only state where Latinos account for more than half of COVID-19 fatalities. Governor Abbott failed to protect us, sending mixed messages, speaking in indecipherable codes, and hiding loopholes in his COVID-19 orders, thus putting at risk the lives of Texans in order not to anger his political base that demanded opening up the state for business before it was safe to do so and who refuse to wear masks in public because it is an infringement on their personal rights.

Given what we know about Texas policymaking, we know that the recovery from the pandemic will be very challenging. The Republican-controlled legislature has been stingy with resources that benefit children, the poor, the working class, and people of color. Texas has not expanded Medicaid, thus making it difficult for many of our fellow Texans to gain access to Obamacare. Even in the midst of the pandemic where so many people have lost their jobs along with their insurance, Texas Republicans have stood stoically, refusing to help people gain access to insurance in these trying times. We will desperately need politicians who are going to support rank-and-file Texans during and after the pandemic. The 2018 election showed that it is possible for Texas to turn blue. A major turnout of Democrats in November could well accomplish this feat, overturning three decades of Republican dominance.

Without such a change, it is likely that there will be plenty of agony in the recovery from the pandemic, especially for people with limited resources.

In sum, please make sure that you vote. President Trump, the Republican trio that run Texas, and many other politicians who have dismissed us in their policy priorities are mounting obstacles to keep us from voting. More than ever, we need to respond and resist. To do so, we need to vote. As Willie Velasquez, the founder of the Southwest Voter Registration and Education Project, who died in 1988, used to remind us “su voto es su voz!” (“your vote is your voice”). Let’s not forget that we have lost so many people to COVID-19, many of them voters who did not get an opportunity to cast their ballot in the upcoming election. We need to make certain that they are not forgotten. Indeed, we can honor our beloved departed by voting in their honor.

If you are not registered to vote, please do so immediately.
October 5 is the deadline for doing so in order to vote in the upcoming presidential election.

Here is the link: bit.ly/registerVote. Please turn out to vote. More than ever, our future depends on our vote.

BIO: Rogelio Sáenz is professor in the Department of Demography at the University of Texas at San Antonio. He is a regular contributor to La Voz de Esperanza.