

Montgomery holds off on rent control, other housing proposals

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Montgomery County officials are resisting extensive changes to housing policies -- primarily rent control -- presented in a report Tuesday that outlines ways to keep renters from being priced out of the wealthy suburb.

Appointed by County Executive Ike Leggett, the "tenants work group," composed of government officials and renters, told the County Council to enact rent control and housing rules that prevent baseless evictions.

Though County Council members say modifications may be needed, they are reluctant to pursue them at the onset of election season. And mirroring Leggett, most have come out against rent control.

"My view is the next council ought to take up housing policy," said Councilman George Leventhal, D-at large, adding "2010 is almost gone" and victim to the "realities of the election calendar."

Rental policies have become an increasingly pressing topic for jurisdictions nationwide, as residents complain their paychecks don't keep up with spikes in the rent.

A quarter of all houses in the Montgomery County are rentals.

Housing advocates say renters can't afford to wait for the political environment to change, with rents skyrocketing by double-digit percentages annually in some cases.

The council's most vocal supporter of rent control, Councilman Marc Elrich, D-at large, called Leggett's resistance "short-sighted" and added, "we are losing affordable housing faster than we can create it."

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Leggett says rent control would discourage housing development during a time when builders are already reluctant to pursue new projects.

The tenant group also recommended a county law to restrict groundless, and sometimes retaliatory, evictions. Their study found that some were afraid to report problems out of fear of being kicked to the curb.

Under county law, landlords can raise rent only once per year, but there is no limit to the increase.

Virginia does not use rent control, and landlords don't have to give a reason for not renewing a contract. The District employs rent control in large apartment buildings built before 1978, and leases are renewed unless the tenant wants to leave or the landlord presents a legal reason for eviction.

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Read more at the Washington Examiner:

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