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OPINION

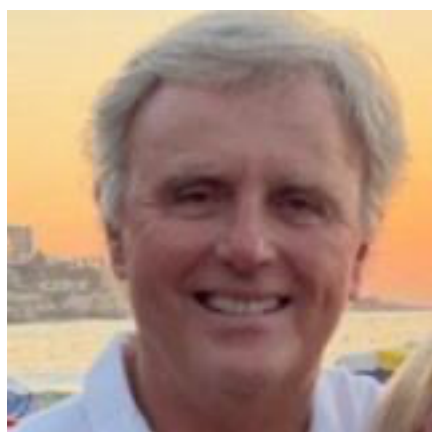
Close to Home: Sonoma County's rent control is backfiring

By **CONTRIBUTED CONTENT**

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For more than four decades, Sonoma County's rent control ordinances for mobile home parks have aimed to preserve affordable housing. But after 40 years of unrealistic restrictions, these policies are backfiring — driving up housing costs, strangling park operations and fueling unnecessary litigation.

As a park owner since 1978, I've witnessed firsthand how these policies have become unsustainable. Annual rent increases are now capped at 70% of the Consumer Price Index — this year, that amounts to a mere 1% raise. No business, particularly one maintaining aging infrastructure and increasing operating costs, can survive on such narrow margins. Worse still, rent cannot be adjusted when a mobile home changes hands, effectively eliminating any opportunity to recover costs over time.



Bill Feeney

These restrictions are forcing many park owners to shut down and repurpose their properties. These actions are not examples of “profiteering” or “vulture capitalism.” They are acts of desperation to survive financially. The alternative, rent arbitration, is prohibitively expensive, inefficient and yields inconsistent outcomes. It is not a viable solution.

Ironically, these ordinances intended to “protect affordability” are instead inflating the cost of mobile homes. Predictably, buyers pay a premium for the benefit of low rent, not for the homes themselves. When coupled with the high interest rates of chattel mortgages used to finance these purchases, the result is anything but affordable.

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Fortunately, there are proven, practical fixes that other California jurisdictions have successfully implemented. One is allowing reasonable rent adjustments when homes change ownership. This costs current residents nothing, reduces inflated home prices for future buyers and gives park owners the potential to earn a fair return — all without litigation.

Another easy reform is exempting long-term leases from rent control. For nearly 40 years, California law recognized such exemptions, which offered residents stable, predictable rents and protected them from the cost and uncertainty of arbitration. Park owners, in turn, were able to reinvest in their deteriorating infrastructure and update their antiquated housing supply. Despite this model’s success, no jurisdiction in Sonoma County has adopted it.

These two straightforward reforms — rent adjustments on turnover and lease exemptions — would make a dramatic difference. They would reduce housing costs, preserve mobile home communities and keep everyone out of court. Most importantly, they would strike a fairer balance between resident protections and park sustainability.

These current ordinances are counterproductive. They are increasing — not decreasing — the cost of housing and threatening the very communities they were designed to protect.

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The Board of Supervisors and local city councils have the power to fix this. By amending their ordinances to allow reasonable rent adjustments on turnover and exempt long-term leases, they can protect current residents, ease the financial burden on future homeowners and ensure that mobile home communities remain a viable part of Sonoma County’s housing solution.

Let’s stop pretending these unsustainable policies are working — and start adopting solutions that work.

Bill Feeney owns MV Estates in Santa Rosa and the Cottages in Petaluma.