



Good intentions, bad results: It's time to repeal rent control

• By Scott Berger - May 5, 2025

Saint Paul is a wonderful city. That's why I live here. While many working families head for the far-flung suburbs, I'm investing in my Union Park home and community because I believe in our city's future.

The data are as clear as they are damning. Since rent control passed, apartment construction permits in Saint Paul have plummeted by 84%, a blow to our future housing supply. Plus, 61% of local property owners have reported reducing maintenance spending, risking worsening housing quality citywide.

Still, Saint Paul has immense unrealized potential, due in no small part to the lack of affordable housing. To lower our cost of living, we need more people, more investment and a stronger tax base. But our experiment with rent control — also called rent stabilization — is backfiring, adding to the very burdens it set out to ease.

Before becoming a homeowner, I rented across Minnesota's three largest cities, often on a tight budget. Renting offers advantages: freedom, flexibility and the chance to explore vibrant corners of our cities without long-term commitments. As a tenant, I also tussled with landlords who invented charges to withhold my security deposit, or who delayed far beyond the legal deadline for its return. For renters in a desirable city like ours, a clean, quality apartment will rarely be cheap, because you get what you pay for.

Housing costs are burdensome for many. Valiant efforts are underway to unlock more affordable housing through various programs and incentives. But it's obvious that these efforts alone cannot overcome the larger market pressures. Desperate for immediate action, Saint Paul's voters approved rent control in 2021, being the first major Midwest city to do so.

Rent control is a noble experiment. It has seemingly straightforward benefits. It seeks to soften rent increases by capping annual hikes. In a narrow sense, rent control can help some renters maintain stable housing. But in the broader, longer-term view, rent control has consistently failed to meet its laudable goals, and ultimately hurts the very people it intends to help.

Back when Saint Paul debated its strict rent control ballot initiative, I eagerly pored over the data. Study after study reached the same conclusion: While rent control benefits some existing tenants for a time, it sharply restricts the creation of new rental units, driving up prices for everyone else.

About 50% of Saint Paul residents are renters. Although a plurality of our voters narrowly approved one of the strictest rent control policies in the country, the ordinance was misguided from the start. What seemed like a well meaning policy at a micro scale has caused demonstrable harm citywide.

As a 2019 Stanford University study on the effects of rent control in San Francisco found, “local popular votes thus appear to be an inefficient way to set rent control policies,” because incumbent renters benefit while future renters, who bear the real costs, do not have a vote. Strikingly, the study also found a “large reduction in rental housing supply” and concluded that rent control “contributed to the gentrification of San Francisco, the exact opposite of the policy’s intended goal.”

The data are as clear as they are damning. Since rent control passed, apartment construction permits in Saint Paul have plummeted by 84%, a blow to our future housing supply. Plus, 61% of local property owners have reported reducing maintenance spending, risking worsening housing quality citywide. Rent-controlled buildings have lost value, shrinking our city’s tax base. Meanwhile, our rigid rent control system, with its complex appeals process and mounting administrative costs, is further straining a city already facing budget pressures. Ongoing uncertainty about exemptions, coupled with systemic inefficiencies, ultimately harms renters and the broader community alike.

That’s why I am urging the City Council to repeal Saint Paul’s rent control ordinance entirely. A repeal wouldn’t mean giving up on affordability. Instead, Saint Paul should pursue proven, pragmatic solutions, such as removing barriers to the construction of new housing of all types across the city and expanding affordable housing programs.

On May 7, the City Council will consider amendments to the current rent control policy. Some council members are expected to propose exemptions for newer buildings. While this would be a step in the right direction, it misses the larger problem. Exempting only new construction would unfairly burden owners of older rental stock who represent about 83% of the city’s rental units and tilt the market toward newer, often more expensive developments. Effectively penalizing owners and renters of older, more naturally affordable housing is both counterproductive and unjust.

Moreover, developers have made it clear: Uncertainty surrounding future rent control changes continues to chill financial investment in Saint Paul. Let’s send a strong signal that the issue is settled—not piecemeal, not uncertainly, but decisively.

Rent control was enacted with good intentions, but it has delivered bad results. Instead of patchwork, inequitable “fixes,” Saint Paul should move forward with data-driven confidence. Repeal rent control and draw on proven best practices and strategies to grow a more affordable, vibrant and welcoming city—for all Saint Paul residents, present and future.

A patent attorney, Scott Berger and his family live in the Snelling-Hamline neighborhood. Though he serves on the board of the Union Park District Council and its land use and transportation committees, the views he expresses are his own.