

CITY NEWS

Housing committee OKs amended Just Cause policy for landlords

Housing4All plan expected to be taken up by City Council by April



by My Ly

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Members of the Housing and Community Development Committee during the Feb. 17 meeting. Credit: My Ly

Evanston landlords and renters clashed during a Housing and Community Development meeting Tuesday night, mostly over a policy in the city's strategic housing plan that would require landlords to provide a legitimate reason to not renew a tenant's lease.

After four hours and more than 40 public comments, the committee settled on expanding the language of the highly contested Just Cause policy from "strengthen renter protections – Just Cause," to say the city would "explore a Just Cause policy to strengthen renter protections and promote housing stability.

"Just cause policies restrict non-renewals and evictions to specific, well-defined circumstances, such as nonpayment of rent, significant lease violations, or major property rehabilitation needs. This reduces the risk of residents being displaced for arbitrary or unjust reasons, without restricting housing providers in extenuating circumstances," the amended plan language drafted by Elizabeth Williams, planning and zoning manager, says.

More discussion needed: Burns

Bobby Burns, chair of the committee and Fifth Ward councilmember, reminded the attendees that Just Cause is not going to be immediately implemented along with the [Housing4All](#) update released in January, but that he wanted more discussion on the topic.

"Because I am chair I am going to make sure Just Cause continues to have the discussion that was improperly not allowed in the last term. ... I want to make sure we discuss it, whether I support it or not in the end, I have not made that decision," Burns said.

According to the speakers, citing the [Institute for Housing Studies at DePaul University](#), nearly 45% of Evanston residents are renters. Throughout the meeting, members from all sides acknowledged the city has a housing affordability crisis.

Some landlords who spoke during public comment said they considered their work small-scale with only a handful of tenants, and a few said that having to prove their choice to not renew a lease would create an unnecessary burden.

'Bad policies,' said one landlord

Aron Bornstein, a landlord and the president of the Evanston North suburban housing providers, said the policy would be bad for tenants and landlords.

“These are bad policies,” Bornstein said. “They will raise rents, they complicate the landlord’s job, and they are bad for real estate in general, which will drive away investors.”

If a program were implemented, landlords would need to have a valid reason not to renew a lease, including nonpayment or material violations of the lease, in an effort to curb retaliatory or discriminatory evictions, some committee members said.

Bornstein said the policy would push out “good tenants” if landlords aren’t able to end the leases of bad ones, like people smoking inside the building or sneaking pets into their homes, which impacts other residents.

“We call this a lifetime lease scam,” Bornstein said. “It means a landlord cannot get rid of a bad tenant when the lease is up.”

Comments in support

Several renters spoke in support of the Just Cause policy to protect residents from large corporations, including members of the Quadrel tenants union, made up of people living in one of the properties managed by privately owned property management company North Park Ventures.

Members of the tenants union are in lease negotiations with the property management arm of the private company, Quadrel Realty Group, which they say has increased rent while neglecting maintenance of the buildings since 2022.

Karen Ollivierre, a member of the tenants union, urged the city to implement Just Cause.

“This isn’t just our problem but 45% of the Evanston residents rent their homes,” Ollivierre said. “When landlords like Quadrel refuse to negotiate and continue to break the law, they threaten the civility of nearly half our city’s population.”

Another renter, Claudia Garcia-Rojas, said she fears retaliatory nonrenewal of her lease after she reported her property manager, Schermerhorn & Co., to the city for a lack of central heat last month.

“I know how easily silence can be enforced when a landlord holds the power to simply decline a renewal,” Garcia-Rojas said.

“Just Cause is about power, but it is also about shame and right now there is no shame built into a system that

allows landlords to ignore repair requests, to squeeze tenants to absorb the cost of negligence and then quietly remove them at renewal when they assert their rights,” she said.

Protection needed: Geracaris

During the committee discussion, Ninth ward Councilmember Juan Geracaris said he doesn’t want to overcomplicate the process for small landlords but there needs to be protection for renters with large corporations who retaliate by not renewing a lease.

“I think what’s happening is that a lot of you who are coming here to talk about Just Cause and how terrible it is, you guys are helping out the bad actors, and the bad actors who do this stuff aren’t here,” Geracaris said.

Geracaris said he agrees that if a tenant is creating issues harming other residents, small landlords should be able to nonrenew their lease.

“I think a lot of examples that were brought here tonight, those are bad tenants and no one wants housing providers to renew the lease for a bad tenant that is violating the lease,” he said. “I personally don’t want it to be over burdensome.”

Another councilmember, Shawn Iles (3rd Ward), agreed and supported keeping Just Cause in the plan.

“It’s an issue that is not going away but that doesn’t mean I’m not interested in exploring other things that might hold a bad actor accountable,” Iles said. “I’m not interested in catching the landlords we see here tonight, but I am very interested in catching corporate landlords like Quadrel.”

Some pushback from committee

However, while the amended policy remained in the plan, two committee members, Eighth Ward Councilmember Matt Rodgers and Joanne Zolomij, instead wanted to remove the language altogether.

Rodgers said many of the landlords in his ward offer affordable housing, which the city could lose if they add Just Cause.

“If we make cumbersome problems for these people, they will sell.” Rodgers said. “And who are they selling to? Not another small landlord, they’re selling to someone like Quadrel.”

Landlords also took issue with two other outstanding items that were left over from the Jan. 20 meeting, including implementing a tenant/community right to purchase program and to explore a transfer of development rights program. Both were removed from the plan after brief discussion from committee members.

The committee also discussed and amended the expected work timeline for the housing plan and decided to table the other agenda items until the March 17 meeting, including Rental Price-fixing, which was proposed by Geracaris over a year ago.

The final Housing4All plan is expected to be presented to the full City Council by April.

Rufus Laggren

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Disclaimer: I'm a very small landlord. I have good tenants and I make serious efforts to maintain my property, for lots of reasons. I have personal relationships w/my tenants.

The ownership type and the size of the owner's income properties make every difference to the appropriateness of micro managing laws.

One major reason I totally support small and oppose large, much less huge, enterprise is the variety and humanness of Ma/Pa biz. Forcing cookie cutter rules on a community and eliminating large chunks of individual agency, control, choice destroys the basis of a human, varied, environment. Destroys the human ecology, replacing it w/rules and administrators.

It also eliminates another human interface where individual people relate other individuals. It removes another part humanness from our lives. Yes, there are "good" people and there are "bad" people. But IMHO we are way better off in the end to encourage personal interaction – and turning more and more of our relations into formal check boxes destroys that personal ecology.

People are different. We like different things, have different buttons, habits, viewpoints. So there will be some good experiences, some bad, some meh. I think that's healthier, more optimistic, more confident, more flexible w/more possibility than an institutional box where it's all predecided. I greatly prefer, and on the whole have had better results dealing w/individuals. Especially w/powerful individuals who have the position, confidence, power and authority to make their own decisions.

So don't turn Evanston into a clockwork box trying to micromanage human relations, morals, all that. Legislating morality is an oxymoron – self contradictory. It totally defeats any supposed purpose. This I think, is one of the points that completely fries conservatives when they look at lib/progs. And I pretty much agree, even as a lifer democrat.

Now. Size and structure matter. What I wrote above does NOT apply to corporations, huge partnerships single proprietorships grown so large they become in effect corporate. Despite a criminally foolish and hypocritical law passed early the last century (I think) corporate structures are not people and don't, in any way at all, deserve to be considered such. Not in any way, on any field, in any venue.

Which means THOSE LEGAL FICTIONS need regulating. Size and structure. Go for it.

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