

We will fight to protect property rights at the ballot box, in the courts, and now by referendum.

By Don Katich — SBRPA Board of Directors



This is the newest and most vital front in the long campaign to defend the rights of property ownership in Santa Barbara. The hour demands resolve, as the City Council advances a permanent Rent Stabilization Ordinance that would infringe upon the use and value of private dwellings. Against this advance the ***Help Save Santa Barbara Housing Committee***, sponsored by Santa Barbara Rental Property Association Issues Political Action Committee, has joined the fight. Gathered beneath it are housing providers, small business owners, renters, homeowners, residents, and citizens of every walk who share one conviction—that Santa Barbara requires practical measures to ease the cost of living, not a vast and expensive new bureaucracy at City Hall. They reject the Council's present direction and are determined that the people themselves shall judge the matter.

The referendum is no mere procedural formality. It is the constitutional instrument by which the citizens of Santa Barbara may review and, if they choose, overturn an ordinance adopted by their elected representatives. Once the ordinance is attested by the City Clerk, a period of thirty days begins. In that short span the Committee and its allies must gather and submit more than 5,500 valid signatures from registered Santa Barbara voters. Should the petition be found sufficient, the ordinance is suspended. The Council is then compelled to act: it may repeal the measure entirely, it may call a special election so that the question may be decided without delay, or it may place the ordinance before the voters at the next regular municipal election. In either electoral course the final decision rests not with a narrow majority of the Council but with the broader body of the people who must live under the law.

This process is deliberately swift and deliberately rigorous. The thirty-day window ensures that the challenge is mounted before the ordinance takes deep root. The signature threshold—set by state law at roughly ten percent of the city's registered voters—demands genuine public support rather than the effort of a few. When that threshold is met, the people's right to decide becomes operative. In contests over housing regulation and the security of property, few tools are more powerful. Major

contests over housing regulation and the security of property, few tools are more powerful. Major restrictions upon ownership affect not only the owners of today but the supply, maintenance, and cost of dwellings for years to come. The referendum restores the ultimate authority to those whose lives and livelihoods are directly touched.

We have witnessed the force of this instrument before. In the City of Pacifica, after the Council moved to impose rent control, opponents turned to the referendum. Pacifica's referendum petition protested the interim ordinance imposing a rent increase and just cause eviction requirements. The petition had at least 2,490 valid signatures, exceeding the 2,427 required, and prevented the interim ordinance from taking effect. Voters ultimately defeated Measure C, with 60.4% No and 39.6% Yes. That example stands as both precedent and encouragement. The ***Help Save Santa Barbara Housing Committee*** seeks the same outcome: practical policies that improve affordability, encourage responsible stewardship of property, keep rental housing in productive use, and guarantee that no permanent regulatory regime is imposed without the explicit consent of the citizenry.

Let no one suppose that the protection of property rights concerns only the housing providers. It concerns every man and woman who owns, or who aspires to own, property in Santa Barbara and throughout California. If you own a single-family home, they are coming for you. If you own a condominium, they are coming for you. If you dream of owning a place for yourself or for your family, they are coming for you. The only path to cheaper housing without a genuine increase in supply is to make existing homes less valuable—and government has shown itself remarkably proficient at interfering with the marketplace to that end. The housing crisis is not an accident of nature; it is the accumulated result of decades of city policies that have rendered new development virtually impossible. It is simple arithmetic: the cost of building in Santa Barbara does not pencil out. When regulations, fees, delays, and restrictions drive the expense of construction beyond any reasonable

rights. The City has discussed vacancy control and has directed its staff to examine a vacancy tax upon residential and commercial premises. There are proposals for heavier transfer taxes upon higher-value homes—measures sometimes styled a mansion tax. Pressure mounts within the rent-stabilization debate to narrow or remove the exemptions that have long shielded single-family homes and condominiums. Voices are heard advocating the erosion or outright repeal of Proposition 13, that foundational protection of property taxation. Each of these ideas, if pursued, would further diminish the security and predictability upon which private ownership depends.

In the courts the struggle continues. The Association, joined by individual owners, has carried the fight into the federal district court against the temporary rent freeze that took effect on the twenty-sixth of February and against the five-year lockout that would bar an entire parcel from residential rental use once any unit is withdrawn. The amended complaint asserts that these measures amount to an unconstitutional taking without just compensation, a denial of due process and equal protection, and an unlawful interference with contracts freely entered. While the costs of insurance, taxation, and essential maintenance continue their relentless rise, the freeze holds revenue in chains. Such a regime endangers the very upkeep of the dwellings upon which so many families rely.

Milton Friedman observed with characteristic clarity: "The existence of a free market does not of course eliminate the need for government. On the contrary, government is essential both as a forum for determining the 'rules of the game' and as an umpire to interpret and enforce the rules decided on. What the market does is to reduce greatly the range of issues that must

be decided through political means." When government expands beyond that limited role and begins to dictate the terms of ownership itself, efficiency falters, investment flees, and the very supply of housing contracts. The referendum, the lawsuit, and the electoral contest are the means by which citizens may insist that government remain the umpire rather than the player who rewrites the rules mid-game.

At the ballot box the defense continues. Candidates must be chosen who understand that property rights are not a special privilege but the common foundation of prosperity and liberty. Beyond mere defense lies the constructive work: to clear the obstacles that prevent new housing from rising. Streamlined permitting, reduced fees for needed projects, sensible density where appropriate, and clear pathways for construction and adaptive reuse would expand supply, relieve pressure upon existing rentals, and deliver genuine affordability without the sacrifice of ownership or the creation of yet another apparatus of control.

Thus on every front—by referendum, in the courts, and at the polls—we shall contend. We shall not be weary. We shall not yield. The rights of property are not the concern of a narrow interest; they are the inheritance of the whole community. Let every citizen who values that inheritance stand with the **Help Save Santa Barbara Housing Committee**, join the gathering of signatures the moment the ordinance is attested, sustain the legal cause, choose wisely when the ballots are cast, and demand policies that build rather than bind. In this steadfast purpose lies the surest path to victory and the ultimate preservation of your rights. This is our hill to die on.