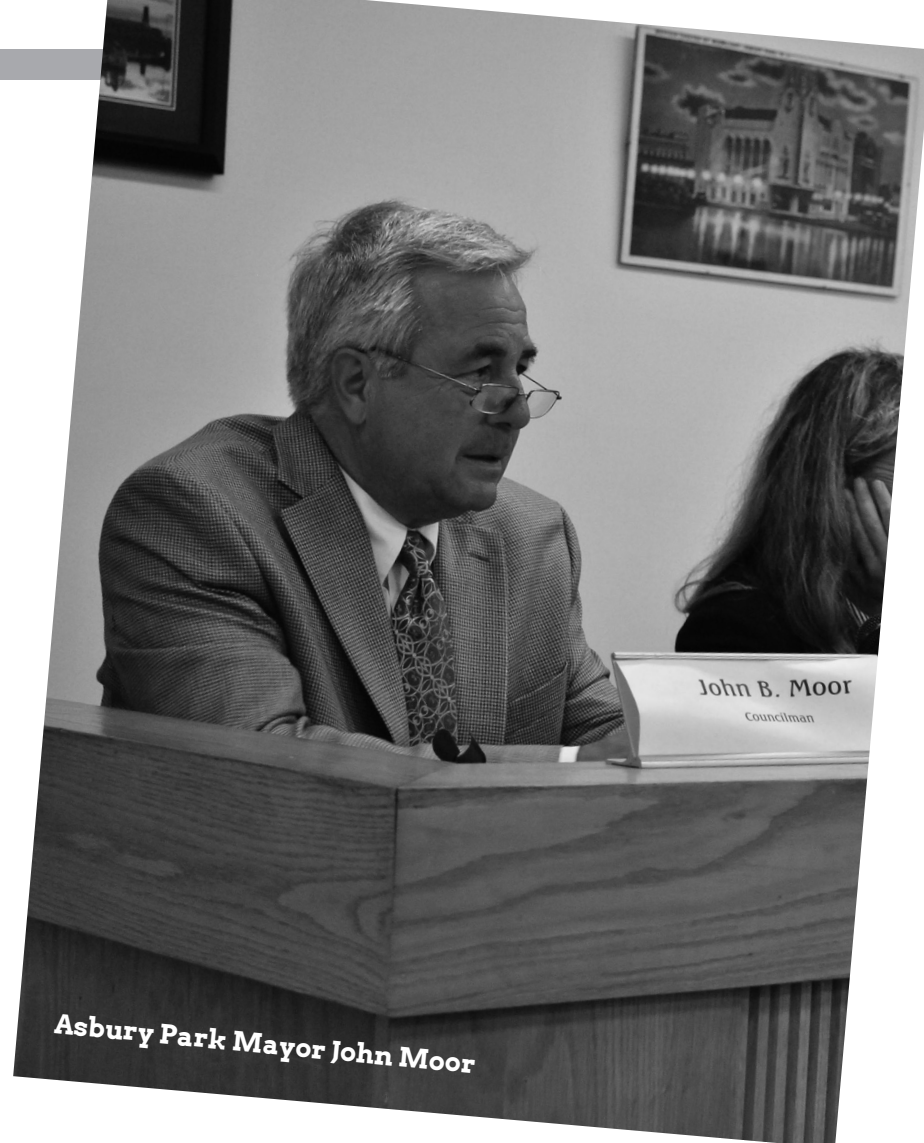


THE REAL AGENDA BEHIND ASBURY PARK'S RENT CONTROL?



Asbury Park Mayor John Moor

COUNCIL MOVES TO LIMIT RENTS, BUT BRUISED EGOS WILL FORCE A DIVISIVE REFERENDUM UPON CITY

ASBURY PARK — The issue of rent control suddenly came to the fore in our city when a group of affordable housing advocates got enough signatures on a petition to have a referendum, now set for April 20, on a very tough rent control ordinance they proposed.

The coalition putting it together genuinely thought it was the right thing to do. But by getting such an extreme proposal on the ballot they unwittingly committed an act of strategic brilliance — forcing everyone to come to the table to enact some form of real rent control for Asbury Park.

That happened. Even the landlords accepted some type of rent caps, which is unheard of. And after listening to everyone for a couple months, the city council last week introduced their own rent control ordinance that provides real protection for renters immediately.

The affordable housing advocates should deservedly congratulate themselves. What would normally be a controversial measure — the city council's rent control ordinance — looks moderate compared to theirs set for that public vote on April 20. That's why the city council can smoothly pass its own measure now.

The city council votes on its ordinance on March 10. The affordable housing coalition has until the next day on March 11 to withdraw their referendum. They should. And how the coalition responds is going to tell you a lot about their real motivation in all this. (If the referendum passes on April 20, the coalition's ordinance takes the place of the city council's.)

Is the coalition's primary goal to achieve protection against excessive rent spikes for tenants here in Asbury Park right now — which the city council will provide by passing their rent control ordinance on March 10?

Or is it about politically attacking the council, as we've noted that several members of the affordable housing coalition have lost prior elections to them. Will bruised egos of not being in power carry the day — rather than what's right for the city?

Given the immediate response by the affordable housing coalition to the city council's ordinance, it looks like we're going the bruised ego route. Typical Asbury Park.

The coalition issued a disingenuous press release blasting the council for introducing “a rent stabilization ordinance that favors landlords.” Here we go. The political pettiness gene is alive and well in Asbury Park.

What the city council introduced by no means, when compared to all the rent control ordinances in the state, “favors landlords.” It's just not as extreme as the proposal of the affordable housing advocates.

In their first response, the rent control proponents had a choice: They could launch a bullshit attack on the council, or they could have said their proposal is the better choice and then argued the merits of it.

They chose the bullshit route.

The right thing? Pull the referendum and work with the council on modifying the rent control ordinance if needed once it's in place. Mayor John Moor said over and over when introducing the council's plan that it can be continuously revisited and that's the council's intent.

The problem? When voters approve an ordinance by referendum, like the coalition's rent control ordinance, it cannot be amended for three years. That's state law. If there's any problems, you can't do anything about them for three years. That's not right. Sure, if the council did nothing that would be a different story. But they're enacting a rent control ordinance that can be changed as necessary.

Under the city council's ordinance, rents can't be increased by more than 3.5 percent a year. If inflation runs higher than that, then rents can't be increased more than the Consumer Price Index (CPI), which is the common measure of inflation.

That's rent control. And if landlords want to do capital improvements, and

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Anyone could win in that scenario. Jones and Maida are well-positioned. Triggiano and Yassin are on the wrong side of an issue involving a closed senior center. And Jones and Maida should embrace non-partisan election reform, while they reject the county party's interference in Red Bank. That will doubly show their independence. Voters will love it.

Some would call that disloyalty to the Democratic Party. Give me a break. This is a local borough council race. It's about what's good for the town, which Jones and Maida claim to be their motivation. Let's see them prove it. Maybe they'll win as independents, or maybe Triggiano and Yassin or a pair of normal Republicans will. Or some combination. Welcome to democracy.

Here's the likely outcome to the Democrats nomination battle: Dem Chairman Brown pulls a bullshit move by putting all four feuding Red Bank Democrats together in the favored Democratic ballot position. That's also rarely done. And there's no reason for it here: Triggiano and Yassin refused to seek the Red Bank party's nomination. Why should they get the advantage of the favored ballot position at all, even with Jones and Maida in it also? If that happens, Jones and Maida should also run as independents to take a stand against interference in Red Bank. They'd also have a better shot at winning as independents in that scenario, rather than in the primary.

But Jones and Maida won't run as independents. These guys are going to do what they're told. Their friend Ed Zipprich, simply because he's party chair, would never allow two Democrats he brought to the table to run as independents.

But he should. If Triggiano and Yassin get into the favored ballot position, with or without Jones and Maida, that means long-time Democratic leader and activist Ed Zipprich is getting screwed by the county party. And so is Red Bank. Zip should take a stand for once for what is right over allegiance to the Democratic Party when they're wrong.

Let me make something clear here. I don't care who wins the Democratic nomination, or eventually the general election. For example, although the feeling is not mutual, I've always liked what Kate Triggiano is all about. She's a Bernie Sanders Democrat, and I admire the goals and idealism of the progressives, even if I question their practicality and intransigence at times. I also respect Kate's impressive civic involvement. I just can't get beyond someone like her supporting exclusionary Democratic machine politics. Bernie Sanders sure wouldn't. And nor should Kate Triggiano.

In fact, I can't get beyond any of the politicians up there supporting that ridiculous little Democratic one-party machine. It stifles the town and excludes people who should have a shot — including other Democrats who can't get the local party nomination or don't care to kiss any asses to get it. The whole thing drives me up a wall. Makes me crazy. Yes, I admit it. I'm obsessed!

But even Democratic State Senator Vin Gopal, who's close with all sides in Red Bank's Democratic battle, says all towns should have non-partisan elections. And he's a former Monmouth County Democratic Party Chairman. Enough already.

The only Democratic elected official who's stepped forward to call for non-partisan elections is long-time Mayor Pasquale "Pat" Menna. He's also had enough of this nonsense. In addition, last month long-time former Councilman Mike Dupont — a potential mayoral candidate with his own following — called for non-partisan elections. Why thirty-something council members Triggiano and Yassin are letting the old guys grab the mantle of reform is beyond me.

Menna says that this month he's going to put on the council agenda the subject of authorizing a Charter Study Commission. Don't let the commission's name fool you. It has real power that could lead to non-partisan elections in Red Bank. If the borough council authorizes it, voters would be asked to approve establishing the commission as well as electing its five members.

The commission will review Red Bank's antiquated 120 year old form of government and suggest changes — which are then submitted to voters for approval. Those changes can include non-partisan elections. The charter commission can also recommend changes like giving a mayor or a professional municipal manager more power in order to streamline operations.

In fact, a charter study commission was the very first, and identified as the most important, recommendation of a no-holds-barred 2018 review of borough government operations. The Democratic Mayor and the all-Democratic Council commissioned that report themselves. The council has implemented almost all the other recommendations — but not the charter study commission because it could lead to non-partisan elections. Meaning real competition in Red Bank municipal elections.

Talk about putting your political careers and party before your town. Enough already. Does anyone have any guts up in Red Bank, aside from the Mayor?

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add the costs to rents, they must get approval of a Rent Levelling Board. Again, that's typical rent control.

The affordable housing coalition's plan caps rents at the Consumer Price Index, but their ordinance says that rents can never go up more than 3 percent. In terms of protecting existing tenants against unfair rent spikes — the goal here — there's really no practical difference between the city council ordinance and the coalition's ordinance on the ballot.

The big difference, however, is that the city council allows a landlord to raise the rent back up to market level when a tenant leaves. That's called vacancy decontrol. Pretty much every rent control ordinance in the state has some form of it.

The coalition's ordinance has no vacancy decontrol of any kind. That's extreme. It means that rents can never rise on any unit more than inflation or 3 percent, whichever is lower — even when there's new tenants — forever. That has nothing to do with protecting tenants here now. That's a different agenda — and there's even compromises there. But the referendum proposal can't be changed at this point. It's set for a vote on April 20 as is, unless the coalition pulls it. And if it passes, it can't be changed for three years.

Rent control leads to the collection of less rents by landlords — that's its purpose, after all. But it also means landlords pay less property taxes than they would have. That's because a landlord's tax bill is based on how much rent they collect. Thus rent control shifts some part of the tax burden to homeowners as well as commercial property landlords, who usually pass the tax increase on to their commercial tenants — often small businesses. (Rent control does not apply to commercial properties in New Jersey.)

Not allowing any form of vacancy decontrol at all, as per the referendum proposal,

makes that shift of tax burden more severe, as rents are further reduced since they can't rise to market rates upon a vacancy. In addition, not allowing any vacancy decontrol means less money for landlords to improve and keep up their properties. That's why towns with rent control have some form of vacancy decontrol. This is an issue that should be revisited and evaluated once the council's ordinance is in place — as the Mayor says the council will do. In contrast, having no vacancy decontrol in any form for at least three years, as would happen if that referendum goes forward and passes, is extreme.

The affordable housing coalition has some other concerns with the city's proposal. The city covers buildings with five or more units. The affordable housing coalition plan basically covers every rental, including single family homes and individual condos. Even seasonal rentals. Again, what's covered can be adjusted as needed. That issue is not a reason to insist on going forward with a divisive referendum.

This newspaper has given the affordable housing coalition well-deserved praise for forcing this issue to be addressed. The council is now moving to enact a rent control ordinance that will give real protection against rent spikes to tenants here now. Success has been achieved. They really did it.

But with that victory, let's see if they now move in a different direction: A political attack on the council with a false narrative — during an unneeded and divisive referendum — that the elected officials are favoring landlords. That's bullshit.

Given that the council has consistently beaten their opponents by margins of 2-1 — including two of the affordable housing coalition members just this past November — we're not so sure that's going to go over well in the city.

And it shouldn't.