



Rent Study Committee Offers Listening Sessions

One way Easthampton is addressing the housing crisis is by seeking a home rule petition from the state to implement rent stabilization. If granted, this would allow the city to set local rent regulations that are not ordinarily allowed under state law, such as capping the amount that rent can be raised each year.

This would not only provide a second option should the statewide ballot measure fail to pass in November, but also allow the city to implement policies that the measure might not cover, such as decontrol restrictions, or a requirement for landlords to share with tenants the savings on reduced upkeep costs.

The Rent Study Committee will hold three listening sessions at city hall to gather public opinion and consider specific policies that residents would like to propose. The first session will be for renters and residents and the second for landlords and developers. The third session will focus on reconciling differences of opinion and drafting the final policy to submit with our petition to the state government, if passed by the full City Council.

The first listening session, for tenants and residents, will be held on Thursday May 7 at 6 pm, as a joint meeting between the Rent Study Committee and the Easthampton Tenants Union. The second, for landlords and developers, will be held on Tuesday May 19, also at 6 pm. The third session will be scheduled when an initial policy is drafted and ready for public feedback.

Carl Sailor
Rent Study Committee member



ETU members showed up strong at the No Kings rally in Pulaski Park on March 28.

Boston Real Estate Board Report: Rent Control Is an “Untold Threat”

In March, the Greater Boston Real Estate Board (GBREB), a powerful deep-pocketed landlord lobbying group, commissioned the report “Untold Threat: Rent Control Ballot Question Will Imperil Municipal Budgets.” It claims that rent control would damage city budgets and harm the housing market across Massachusetts. It aims to scare voters and politicians. Many news outlets quickly promoted this report.

But it reflects the interests of landlords and real estate investors, not tenants or homeowners.

The report claims that rent stabilization would erase about “\$300 billion in home and property values.” It says this would shrink city tax bases and force cuts to public services. However, that number is based on speculation, not real evidence. The GBREB compared a few very different housing markets and guessed how the whole state might respond.

Even more important, the idea of “lost value” is misleading. The report also reveals the financial motivations of its backers: “The value of an apartment building depends on its ability to generate revenue for the owner. Any rule that limits revenue, like curbing a landlord’s ability to charge appropriate rents, will make properties less valuable.”

That does not mean homes disappear or that real wealth is destroyed. What the report calls “lost value” mostly represents future increases in rent that landlords would expect to collect, not actual housing being lost.

Housing policy should not exist to guarantee that real estate prices rise forever. In fact, rising property values are one of the main causes of today’s housing crisis. When property prices increase, landlords raise rents to cover their costs and increase profits even more.

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Meetings Every Thursday
5:30 to 7:00 p.m.
City Council Chambers
Easthampton Municipal Building
50 Payson Avenue



Website & Social Media



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Struggling with a Rent Increase on a Fixed Income

Jean Frances, a longtime resident in her 80s, shares her experience as a subsidized tenant

I've been here for 11 years, in this building. It was an old factory. It was really in bad shape. These rich white boys in Boston, they made a deal with the devil. They got tax credits to do the affordable housing thing. So they got the money to come and develop this part of this factory.

When I moved in [my rent] was \$800, they've consistently taken it up by \$25 or \$40, now it's \$940. I'm still like, okay. But this year they went up \$153. I think that's prompted because of the rent control thing. These creeps are raising it as high as they can before the rent control comes in.

When I started going to meetings, I knew it was going to happen. I didn't know how bad it was going to be, and I wondered how they could do it, because this is its own special little thing.

When you're involved in any kind of federal housing stuff, they know everything about you. They know every penny that I have. They know pennies that I don't even know that I have.

The first letter that came around, they slipped it under the door and they said, "If you're interested in renewing your lease at this rate, sign this paper." What they do is start the recertification process. So they're recertifying me, to make sure I have enough money or don't have, whatever they have to look at.

Well, I can't pay that much money. The older I get, and the more my [savings] goes down, I cannot afford it. I'm going to have to die. That's what I say. They say, "Oh, you can go to one of these old people's places" where they collect 30% or whatever, and the wait list is eight years. I said what the eff, I'll be dead in eight years. What are you talking about?

So I went down to negotiate and they had three people there: the compliance manager, the on-site manager here, and an old on-site manager. We walk in, the compliance manager says, "Oh, Jean, I've got some good news. We're not going to raise your rent \$153, we're only going to raise it \$90."

They make it like it's the new manager's fault, that she had the wrong scale. She's as sweet as can be, and she's the low woman on the totem pole. The compliance manager should have given her the correct scale.

I was so mad at myself, I didn't say, "Well, if we're going to negotiate, how about \$50?" They've got this kind of leeway, and they screwed up, let's go down. But I was so thrown off by it. Then she said to me, "Would you get back to me immediately with this? If you want to accept this \$90 increase." I'd been holding off on it. Should I do this? What should I do?

Natalia [a union organizer] has come, and we've talked to different people. It's going to be hard to organize the building, because everybody's on a different thing. But I was saying maybe I should try to go in and renegotiate this, get it down where it's reasonable. Also, if I could get enough people to do it, could we come in and do collective bargaining?

Pine Valley Negotiations Continue

The Pine Valley Tenants Association met with their landlords, Matthew and Donna Gawle, and their lawyer for the second time on March 31. At the initial session on March 12, tenants sought to negotiate past and future rent increases and raised additional concerns. After hearing the tenants' demands – including a proposal to limit rent increases to 2.8% above 2025 levels – the Gawles adjourned the meeting to consider these requests.

Matthew Gawle opened the second meeting by expressing concerns about rising debt, insurance costs, and maintenance expenses. He stated that they would not engage in rent negotiations with the tenants association at this time. He further asserted that the recent rent increases are non-negotiable and implied that the alternative would be to sell some properties, potentially to corporate landlords. Notably, one corporate landlord, Hurricane Properties, negotiated with Easthampton tenants last summer to limit their rent increase to 7.5%.

Although representing Pine Valley Realty, Matthew frequently referred to one subsidiary, Bermatt Properties, during the discussion. Bermatt is owned one-third by Matthew and two-thirds by his mother, Julia Gawle. He stated that Bermatt has been operating at a loss and that the recent rent increases are intended to prevent the company from going out of business. He also noted that Bermatt's continued operation has depended on a loan of more than \$400,000 from his mother.

The Gawles presented documentation outlining various expenses, including water and sewage, waste collection, real estate taxes, and capital expenditures such as roof repairs and fire escape replacements. Matthew acknowledged that they had not consistently set aside funds for these expenses over the years, noting that this is a common practice among landlords. However, the material he provided did not include information on rental income, nor did they reference the Gawles' many other real estate holdings.



Another topic discussed was the potential implementation of rent control, which is scheduled to appear on the state ballot in November. Matthew did not state what it would mean for Bermatt Properties if the measure passes, but expressed a preference to delay further discussions with the tenants association until after the vote. Ultimately, no final decisions were reached regarding the tenants' demands, and both parties agreed to meet again for a third session on May 7.

– Rylee Kassirer

ETU Connects with NYC At Chinatown Picket Line

On March 29, Ilene and I stood in front of the Museum of Chinese in America (MOCA) in New York City, joining Youth Against Displacement and National Mobilization Against Sweatshops (NMASS), to share stories and information and support their cause.

Youth Against Displacement is a group of young adults fighting against overdevelopment and displacement in Chinatown and for community-led rezoning across NYC. NMASS is fighting to stop wage theft, end the 24-hour workday, and protect their communities from displacement. For five years they've been protesting against MOCA and mega-landlord Jonathan Chu (a board member), demanding they return the \$35 million they received from the city to not oppose building a jail in Chinatown.

Chu has been profiting off displacing residents, workers, and small businesses. He evicted the Jing Fong Banquet Hall (a beloved community center) and replaced it with a luxury furniture business. Many people lost their jobs, and this caused decreased foot traffic and raised rents for surrounding housing and businesses.



We also shared our story of the ETU, that it's the first citywide tenants union in Massachusetts, and we're fighting back against outrageous rent increases and supporting the rent stabilization bill. We do this with weekly meetings to share information with our neighbors with the hope of building a stronger community.

The picket ended with loud chanting, then we were invited to join them for lunch. They then went right back to business, planning and strategizing for the week to come. It was very inspiring to see the younger generation getting involved and coming together to stand up for their beliefs and their community and to have their voices heard.

Before leaving, we exchanged emails and social media info to stay in touch. Through my work with the ETU, I've learned knowledge is power and if you want change you need to get involved.

– Kelley Hutchins

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Rent Control Is an “Untold Threat”

A policy that slows runaway housing prices is not a disaster or something radical that would “upend the real estate market.” Under the proposed ballot measure, rents could still go up each year, but increases would be limited to inflation or 5%, whichever is lower. For many tenants facing eviction or displacement, this is a necessary correction.

This rule would protect tenants from sudden rent hikes of 20% to 60%, which are all too common in the current tight housing market. Across Massachusetts, renters are struggling with rising housing costs. Many families now spend a large share of their income just to keep a roof over their heads.

Housing should be treated as a basic human need, not just as an investment. Rent stabilization will not solve the housing crisis by itself. But it can give tenants stability while communities work on longer-term solutions like building more affordable housing and strengthening tenant protections. The real threat to communities is not rent stabilization, it's a housing system that values profits over people.

– Ben Taylor

Dealing with Incompetent Corporate Ownership

Last spring, wannabe big-time property investors snatched up our quirky old building when the previous owner apparently realized he couldn't keep up with the responsibility. Over the next few months we organized, negotiated a lower rent increase, got some work done on the property, and signed new leases. Big wins, right?

Sure, but we went from a familiar, if dysfunctional, one-on-one tenant-landlord relationship to a chaotic clown show. The ringmaster is a millennial finance bro from Amherst living in Charleston, South Carolina. He's never seen our property. He's never met us. A few of us had one Zoom call with him last summer. We email him only when absolutely necessary. Our main contact is a property manager in Florida, where they have some luxury properties. She's also never been here. She manages 150+ apartments in Western Mass.

They have a local maintenance team, many of whom don't speak fluent English. We have nothing against them, they're mostly nice guys, but they don't know the building, they misinterpret Health Department reports, and they can't be relied on to convey accurate information to contractors. They've made lots of mistakes, and had to come back multiple times for the same repairs. They don't put down dropcloths before doing work that makes a mess in our living spaces.

Collectively, these are the people responsible for taking care of our home. The incompetence is staggering.

For months, we've had to deal with mixed messages, deflection, and misunderstanding. It's become clear that we can't trust management. We've asked them repeatedly to listen to us, consider our history with the building, take us seriously. They brush us off. But we don't need their permission to talk to contractors when we have information to provide. We will take matters into our own hands and advocate for ourselves.

We know landlord decisions typically don't involve tenants. But we don't have a landlord. We have murky layers of bad management and poor communication, constant stonewalling and indifference. There is no humanity.

They want to believe they simply added another item to their investment portfolio and shouldn't have to bother with tenants, but the truth is they bought a house full of people. To them, it's pure profit potential, but this is our home. We lived here long before they came along. We're constantly trying to make them understand this, to see us, to cooperate with us. Negotiating rent was only the first step. Demanding humane housing is the ongoing challenge.

– Ilene Roizman

Update: On April 1, the property manager notified us that they're selling the building. They're claiming "financial setbacks." We know better, and we're taking action.

Our defining values:

Resiliency: By developing networks and systems of mutual support and defense, we can adapt to changes and be prepared for challenges with flexibility and resiliency.

Solidarity: By consistently working together in solidarity with a commitment to serving the greater good, we can have significant leverage to catalyze change.

Inclusivity: By respecting our neighbors and accepting our differences, we can strengthen the community for everyone. The basis of inclusivity is unity, not uniformity.

Self-determination: By providing education and empowering people to stand up for their rights as residents of Massachusetts, we can foster housing self-determination.

Equity: By encouraging a leader-full organization with everyone on an equal footing, we can promote equity among members and throughout the community.

What guides us:

Consensus decision-making: Everyone's voice counts.

Transparency: Trust depends on open sharing of organizational operations.

Political imagination: Changing the status quo requires pushing boundaries.

Communication/outreach: Education is key, and knowledge is power.

News Bits, Other Meetings, Upcoming Activities

Alliances are strengthening, the union is growing, and our reach is expanding



Our mission is to empower people to stand up for their legal rights and foster solidarity across the city of Easthampton and the surrounding community.

ETU in the Media

In early April, Alex and Ilene sat down with James Sullivan for his eMedia interview series "Pioneer Valley Life." The focus was on how the union started, success stories, expanding outreach, and the impact on the community.

Our Meetings Are Now Hybrid!

The Google Meet link is included in our weekly emails. Sign up at easthamptontenantsunion.org.

Other Meetings in Easthampton

The City Council meets on the first and third Wednesday of the month at 6 pm. In May, meetings are on the 6th and 20th.

The Rent Study Committee meets on the first Tuesday of the month at 6 pm. A listening session is planned for Thursday May 7 as a joint meeting with the ETU. Location and details are being finalized.

Organizing in Greenfield

Our website is drawing interest all over Western Mass – and sparking action! A renter in Greenfield who reached out for help with their landlord is now trying to organize a tenant union there. A meeting is set for Monday May 11, from 6:30 to 7:30 pm at the Greenfield Library.

Before that, ETU members will present workshops at Stone Soup Café on Tuesday April 21 from 6 to 8 pm. Topics will include organizing basics, outreach techniques, and access to resources.

"We want a society where we the people, the workers who produce society's wealth and who make everything possible, control our own lives."

National Mobilization Against Sweatshops
Chinatown, NYC



"The press should be not only a collective propagandist and a collective agitator, but also a collective organizer of the masses." – Vladimir Lenin