

James Chang



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Occupation: Student

Years of Residence: 3 Tenant

Tenant Convention Questionnaire

1. Tell us something about yourself and why you have decided to consider running for Rent Stabilization Board Commissioner.

Three years ago, I came to Berkeley because of its long-standing history as the leader of progressive movements. In my 3 short years here, I have been involved in the City of Berkeley as the Berkeley Student Cooperative (BSC) Vice President of External Affairs (VPEA), a student leader on the redistricting referendum, and a proud member of the food committee during the Occupy Cal Movement. From my experiences I have found that, unfortunately, Berkeley's cherished progressive history is a thing of the past. Presently, both the city and students face a considerable number of problems, and I never imagined I would be one of the few remaining progressive campus mobilizers on issues such as redistricting, budget cuts, and affordable housing. I was naïve to believe Berkeley was some kind of utopia. I came to Berkeley to learn about what it means to be a true progressive: to empower the politically disadvantaged, to nurture the vitality of its community members, and to build coalitions to ensure that Berkeley is a place for everyone. However, when I started organizing in Berkeley, I realized that Berkeley is not being the progressive city it claims. Instead of empowering underrepresented communities, people can see the effects of systematic gentrification and displacements of elders, low-income struggling communities, and communities of color. Instead of empowering students to get involved with politics, we saw the beating of students, and the segregation of students in their right to vote within Berkeley. And instead of listening to disgruntled Berkeley citizens, Berkeley has decided to drag countless progressive leaders and students into frivolous lawsuits. After witnessing the assault on the progressive lifelines in Berkeley, I realized that student issues and community issues are not oppositional, on the contrary, they are convergent. In Berkeley, community issues are student issues, and student issues are community issues. I am running for Rent Stabilization Board Commissioner because Berkeley needs new energized student leadership that will revitalize Berkeley's long history of progressivism on issues regarding increased affordable housing and rent control, on student activism and education on housing issues, and on coalition building within different communities.

2. How much time are you able to devote as a Commissioner? Are your hours flexible? Can you attend meetings until as late as 11:00 pm? Can you attend a 2-hour twice-a-month daytime meeting?

I can devote as much time as needed to be and become a commissioner, even if I work my hours are generally very flexible. And yes, I can attend meetings as late as 11pm and I can definitely attend a two hour twice a month daytime meeting.

When I was Vice President of the BSC I had weekly meetings that were consecutive 6+ hour meetings well beyond 11pm both on cabinet & board. As VPEA, my role didn't require to attend very many meetings, but nevertheless I was committed to my duty to serve as a student leader and to listen to community members and leaders on issues they are facing.

3. What experience have you had with Berkeley's rent control ordinance, the Rent Board's staff, or the elected Board?

I am a Berkeley Tenants Union Steering Committee Member, and as a result I have had the opportunity to table countless Saturday and Tuesday Farmers Market to talk about BTU, the Robinhood Committee, and the Tenants Convention. I attended the Tenants Day of Action in Sacramento as a BTU member, and through BTU, I have experience in talking to renters and in guiding them to the proper resources for resolving conflicts.

I have attended several Rent Stabilization Board Meetings, including most recently, the budget meeting and the appeals process.

I have had countless informal conversations with both members of the elected board and the rent board staff.

4. What do you consider to be your constituency or base of support? What organizations are you affiliated with? What qualities would you bring to the slate? How much time are you able to devote to campaigning from now to November 4th?

My main constituencies are students, particularly progressive students in spaces such as the Berkeley Student Cooperative and CalServe (progressive multicultural community). Note, I have friends in the Greek Community, the Community Service Community, and ties with independent Berkeley residents who believe in moving forward!

I would bring a new enthusiastic energy to the slate through more student participation, and a new generation of progressive activism in regards to issues such as safe space and social media. I like working with people, talking to voters are one of my favorite things, I love meeting new people and building new bridges. I am good at articulating messages in simple terms, and I enjoy listening to others.

I passionately believe in increasing more affordable housing, I believe student and young leadership makes the difference in Berkeley, and I want to ensure that Berkeley is a progressive space, I am wholly committed to devoting all of my time to campaigning from now until November 4th.

5. Tell us about at least three issues that you consider important to tenants in Berkeley.

i. Improving rental housing habitability

The most important thing to any tenant is the habitability of their homes. Whether it is heating, proper running water, safe roofs, fixing hazardous leaks, those are the most basic essentials things that directly affect the lives of tenants.

ii. Protecting tenants from harassment by landlords or agents of property owners

Many tenants often face bullying from landlords, and that affects the psychological comfort and habitability of their homes. Tenants should not be subjected to intimidation tactics nor encounter any hostile attempts from their landlords to remove them from their homes.

iii. Stronger implementation of soft story programs

Seismologists have speculated with great evidence that a 7.0 or higher earthquake is expected to occur along the Hayward Fault in the next 20 years, and most rent-controlled housing is not sufficiently built to withstand such an earthquake. Much of those buildings are soft-story buildings, and they are most concentrated around the south side of the UC Berkeley campus. This is one pressing issue that both students and Berkeley Community members can rally around. Even though the City has passed mandatory retrofits for soft story buildings with 5+ units, there is still much work to be done. We still need to tackle other types of seismically unsound buildings. For example, we need to look at buildings with concrete platforms, buildings that are exempted from the City's mandatory re-seismic fits, monitor the financial hardship exemptions and find a way to fund retrofits for landlords who truly can't pay, and smaller housing units that are not mandated to retrofit. Lastly, we have to enforce the current laws, some landlords still aren't doing retrofits, and it is unfair to owners who follow the law and to tenants who may be I believe that we have to be proactive and cannot wait on the sidelines for somebody else to solve our problems. We can't put a price on people's well-being, safety, right to live, and we must protect their livelihoods.

iv. Outreach, Education, and Coalition building to all Berkeley tenants

For tenant rights to be easily accessible and actively protected, tenants must first know their rights. Foremost, the easiest target for outreach and education is to first

time renters. Young people are often taken advantage of in their housing lease contract, their lack of habitable livable housing, and their inadequacy of knowledge on their rights as a renter. The Rent Board has been a space for educating Berkeley tenants on their rights by providing legal advice and/or dispute mediation, but in order for the rent board to become more influential, people have to know about the services offered, use the services, and fight to keep them. Helping students also helps community members because when everybody has common needs and goals, coalition around tenant activism becomes powerful. The goal is to strengthen the Berkeley Tenants Union and create a database of tenants who will show up to meetings, rallies, and actively participate in the political process in order to expand affordable housing laws and spaces for renters.

6. Is the Rent Board inherently unfair to either large or small landlords? Please explain.

No, the Rent Board is meant to facilitate fair rules and regulations for both landlords and tenants. The point of the Rent Board is to establish protections for tenants, but at the same time, it also spells out the rights landlords can have over their privately owned properties. In reality, most cases brought forward to the rent stabilization board generally favors landlords, so to say that the rent board is inherently unfair to landlords is unfair.

7. What is the role of the Rent Board Commissioners? What powers do they have? What changes do you think should be made in how the Rent Board operates?

The Rent Board plays an important role in city government. The Rent Board Commissioners oversee the administration of the voter approved Rent Ordinance by hiring and firing the Program's Executive Director, adopt the Program's budget, approves major expenditures for the Program, sets policy which guides program administration, enacts regulations to guide the implementation of the ordinance, approves annual rent increases, serves as an appellate body on landlord and tenant petitions for individual rent adjustments, and introduces housing policy proposals.

8. (a) How do you feel about affordable housing? (b) The Robin Hood Committee is circulating a pair of initiatives for 2016 that together will tax large landlords in order to increase subsidies to build affordable housing. Please comment. (c) An initiative on the November ballot will tighten developer requirements for downtown construction on buildings over 75 feet high. Please comment.

a) I 100% support affordable housing, having access to safe drinking-water, food, and shelter is a basic human right.

b) I 110% support the Robin Hood Committee initiatives. I have personally gathered over 50 signatures and personally verified over 600 signatures for both initiatives. (That's great, but WHY do you support taxing large landlords to build affordable housing, tell us the why)(I checked the numbers - K)

c) I have not been actively working on the new downtown green initiative, but I am a proud supporter. It is unfortunate that the City of Berkeley has failed to properly adopt the previous law pertaining to downtown. As a result, we need a downtown green initiative to rectify the issues surrounding downtown. I support this new plan because it is necessary for the downtown area to continue to provide more green and affordable housing, safe and nurturing community, and family friendly business environment.

9. Two other areas related to Berkeley tenants are (a) seismic and fire safety, and (b) transportation issues, such as AC transit subsidies and Bus Rapid Transit. Please comment.

a) Seismic retrofitting is an important issue to tenants because we are expecting a large earthquake within the next 20 years. Not only that, but the Bay Area is a hotpot of regular earthquakes, it would be like sailing a ship through a storm without bringing enough life rafts, we got to be proactive about this. And with the increase dry and uncertain weathers, fire safety is always a concern especially in the face of a water crisis and climate change. We must strive for a greener city with better equipped ways of preventing and dealing with fires. Also, issues relating to water and how we pay for it are issues that the new generation of leaders will have to be brave enough to tackle in order to see more progress on climate action. Also, the inspection on habitability and safety is something that Rent Board leaders have to follow up on in order to ensure safety in the face of crises.

Transportation issues are particularly important to Berkeley Tenants because of the lack of parking spaces. It is important that we create more access and affordable ways for people to get public transportation. This would take collaboration with AC transit board and the city council, but it is an issue Rent Board Commissioners should care about and work with different communities on.

10. The Convention asks all candidates to sign a pledge to not run against or endorse against the slate the Convention selects. Will you sign it? Do you think that the pledge is important? Do you think fair? Explain.

Yes, I will sign a pledge not to run against or endorse against the slate the convention selects. Yes, I think the pledge is important. Yes, I think it is fair because it respects the historical process through which the progressive tenant slate has always been selected

.Most importantly, progressives needs to united, divide & conquer only supports special, big monied interest & this pledge expresses that solidarity.

11. If you are nominated by the convention, will you agree to hire a coordinator with full authority to make campaign decisions in consultation with the slate? Yes! I 100% agree that we need to hire a campaign coordinator that will help coach the slate into winning the election.

12. Is there anything else that we should consider in evaluating you as a candidate?
I was a former student trustee for the Ventura County Community College School District. As an elected student who represented Moorpark, Ventura, and Oxnard College, I had the opportunity to serve side by side with elected Board members from different districts around ventura county. I had a chance to work on hands across California to raise awareness about the issues surrounding education budget cuts. Additionally, I help put pressure on the school administration in dealing with issues surrounding bullying, especially in regards to safe spaces for LGBTQ students. I have the experience working with public board members, and I hope to have the opportunity to become one.