María Poblet

2018 Rent Stabilization Board Candidate Questionnaire

1. I have decided to run for Rent Stabilization Board Commissioner in order to serve the community of Berkeley, contributing the skills and perspective I have gained through 18 years of housing rights organizing in black, latino and working class communities in our region. I am Argentine and Chicana, and came to the bay area in the early 90s to pursue my education at Cal and seek out progressive community and opportunities to develop politically as an activist. After college, I began work as a housing counselor providing tenant rights education and case management in Spanish for immigrant tenants. That work evolved to include organizing tenant unions, creating the first sanctuary ordinances, policy change campaigns like the Tenant Protection Ordinance in Oakland, and Measure JJ, the development of coalitions; and, through two mergers based on “black and brown” unity, the development of Causa Justa :: Just Cause, the largest tenant rights organization in the bay area, which I served as Executive Director of from 2010-2017. I am, at heart, a social movement person. I have helped start many coalitions and alliances, like Bay Rising, Bay Resistance, Homes for All, the Alameda County Immigrant Legal and Education Partnership, and the World March of Women. I don’t think any one person can make the depth of change we need to protect the stability and affordability of our homes, to stand up for black lives and immigrant inclusion, to defend what’s left of our democracy from corporate power. But I think I each of us has a role to play, and I want to do my part in my city. I think city government can be a powerful place to manifest progressive and humanist values, and that I can help make that real with the tools and perspective that social movements offer.
2. Yes, I can make the time commitment required. I was appointed to fill an interim opening last summer and have been a commissioner since the summer of 2017. I have attended all the required meetings, and been able to devote the time needed to play this role well.
3. I have completed multiple days of orientation regarding the rent ordinance and rent board, led by the rent board ED and staff. I am well grounded in basics of our ordinance, how the elected board and staff structure work, and who to turn to in the case of questions or confusion. I have found the staff to be very knowledgeable and accessible, and the website to be full of useful information. It’s one of the things I love about Berkeley’s Rent Board! It’s a highly functional body, which is more than can be said about other Rent Boards I have worked with in different capacities. Since joining the board, I have ruled on multiple cases, learning more about the application of the ordinance through those hefty case readings and conversations, and applying my own experience having brought cases to the rent board years ago as a case counselor. I have weighed in on registration fee waivers. I have learned a lot from my fellow commissioners and their perspectives, and feel that my experience building unity across differences in the social movement setting has been useful in strengthening our board. I serve on the committee on the effects of Costa Hawkins and on the IRA/AGA committee. I am the chair of the Evictions committee.
4. Three issues that I consider important to Tenants in Berkeley:
   1. Affordability! Limiting rents, continuing to closely and proactively monitor rent controlled units to prevent unlawful rent increases and keep people in their homes. Mitigating the impacts of luxury developments in Berkeley and surrounding areas, which increase pressures on long term tenants and drive up rents.
   2. Repealing Costa Hawkins! So that our city can implement the full range of renter protections that were democratically adopted and then pre-empted by corporate interests at the state level, and expand those to address the level of the current crisis of displacement and gentrification.
   3. Racial Equity! Displacement and gentrification impact people of color first and worst, and working class and low income people of all races feel the impacts. Seniors in our community are losing their homes and their communities, and that breaks my heart. In the Latino community, we hold our elders in high esteem and I think this is a value that all of Berkeley needs to reflect, and manifest in its public policy.
5. The primary role of the rent board is to determine, arbitrate and set rent levels for rent controlled units in our city, according to the regulations set forth in our ordinance. It also collects annual registration fees from landlords to finance its operations. Commissioners play a decision-making role in collaboration with Rent Board staff who hold expertise, experience and institutional knowledge about the details of individual and group situations that may come before the board. Commissioners
6. I have been organizing tenants in the bay area for two decades, focused first on the immigrant Latino community and then on the Black community and on “black and brown” unity bringing the two together. I have had experience building tenant unions in single buildings, in multiple buildings owned by the same landlord or company, and in broader city-wide campaigns to expand the rights of renters and curb housing speculation, in San Francisco and in Oakland. The kinds of organizing campaigns that I have been part of fought to win expansions of eviction protections, mitigation of harassment against vulnerable tenants such as LGBTQ, immigrant, black/African American, and seniors, a rent freeze, increases in relocation payments to tenants evicted without fault, language access for non-english speaking tenants, sanctuary ordinances to decrease racial profiling of immigrant tenants, progressive taxation to curb speculation in the housing market (a tax on “house flipper” corporations). The list could go on and on. We didn’t win every fight, but we did win many of them. And I learned the power of organizing – not just to change policy, but also to build the power of the people most impacted by the problems, in order to change who politicians are responsive to. I have also been co-managing a community land trust that I live in, in West Berkeley, which is a model of municipally supported long term affordable housing managed by the residents, for more than 10 years. Some of the skills that this has helped me to build are around alliance building, collective decision making, leadership development, and strategic campaigns to win policy change from both inside and outside of city government.
7. The argument that building market rate housing will solve the affordability crisis is convenient for the corporate developers who stand to make enormous profits from that strategy. What this argument gets wrong is the economics of the situation we are in. While I can conceive of the construction of market rate units as helpful to low income people in areas where there is a lot of land and not a lot of speculation, that is not our situation. We have a crisis of affordability, and financial speculation by corporate developers is driving that crisis. Building market rate housing in a market defined by gentrification is guaranteed to produce big profits for developers. People who have economic means do not willfully choose the more expensive housing in a gentrifying community. People who have very limited economic means do not find affordable units suddenly available after the development of luxury condos. What market rate units do produce is the spread of housing profiteering, as landlords and developers in surrounding areas see the profit they can make by evicting long term tenants, converting rent controlled units into market rate, or converting long term housing into short term unregulated hotels and rental units.

Increasing available and affordable housing in Berkeley requires a much bolder and more integrated approach than the many time debunked theory of “trickle down housing” I think we need to pursue a combination of multiple strategies – progressive taxation to reduce wealth inequality, continued control of rents and the removal of the limitations Costa-Hawkins has placed on our ability to do that, and the construction of deeply affordable units that are specifically geared towards those in our community with limited resources.

1. Absolutely. The Rent Board must serve its role on behalf of the city as a whole, and I being pro-tenant only increases our ability to do that by strengthening the attention to the folks who are struggling the most under the current housing affordability crisis. There are always many sides to any story and any conflict, and the rent board’s ability to consider those in an equitable and fair way is crucial.
2. Rent and eviction controls prevent homelessness. I have known thousands of people over my years in tenant organizing who had a huge rent increase or an eviction and ended up in a shelter because they ran out of options. I have also met people who, thanks to municipal policies to protect tenants, were able to keep their homes, stay in their communities, and maintain some stability in their lives. Keeping folks in their homes is a crucial point of intervention, and fair rulings that prevent and remedy illegal rent increases is a key part of the Rent Board’s responsibility.
3. My base of support is in communities of color and grassroots progressives. I am affiliated with Causa Justa :: Just Cause, Bay Rising, the 9th Street Co-op, and multiple activist groups in communities of color and queer communities. As someone who is based on social movements and not coming from a long trajectory of work on the inside of city government, I bring an outsider perspective about the kind of radical change we need to address the needs of our community. I have a lot of experience building unity among different people and groups, and can bring that “movement building” skillset to the work of the Berkeley Rent Board.
4. I cannot wait for us to win and repeal Costa-Hawkins! It’s urgent! I have seen firsthand how this law has robbed our cities from the ability to implement robust tenant protections, how it has increased housing speculation, and know thousands of people who have been pushed out of their homes and communities because of Costa Hawkins. I believe that if it is repealed, Berkeley needs to revisit the Vacancy Control measure that was passed in the 80s and remains on the books, limiting rents even after a tenant moves out, so that units remain affordable long term. Costa-Hawkins stopped our city from implementing this rigorous affordability measure, stripping democratic rights away from the thousands of people who voted for it.
5. Yes. It makes sense to me that the convention endorsements are more meaningful if candidates act in accordance to the slate selected.
6. Yes.