Rent Board Convention Questionnaire 2018 – Stefan Elgstrand

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

I moved to Berkeley in 2012 to attend the university of my dreams, being inspired and motivated by the progressive history and reputation the City had. But Berkeley was not the utopia I had believed it to be. Struggling to find an affordable place, I moved into a windowless room the size of a walk-in closet the day before classes started, where I lived for 5 years. In summer 2017, I moved into the cheapest two-bedroom apartment I could find in the downtown area, just shy of $2,950 a month. But that wasn’t enough for my landlord. Earlier this year, my landlord tried to evict my roommate and I, going as far as to list our unit for rent, at $3,350. I fought back on the eviction, and I won.

As an assistant to Mayor Jesse Arreguin, I have read the emails and heard the phone calls from people all across Berkeley who struggle every day to keep housing. I have worked on multiple policies to deal with the affordable housing crisis and to improve tenant rights, including proposals to increase the revenue of the Housing Trust Fund, a Tenant Buyout Policy, the Rental Housing Safety Program, a Tenant Protection Ordinance, Measure U1, and advocating to repeal Costa-Hawkins among other policies. I will be a progressive voice for stronger rent control and tenant protections.

1. **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 two‑hour twice‑a‑month daytime meeting?**

I can make my schedule flexible in order to accommodate meetings of the Rent Board. As someone who frequently attends meetings that go on way past 11:00pm, late nights are not a problem. Meetings in the day are also fine, as my boss who was once the Chair of the Rent Board will be understanding if I need to leave work for such meetings.

1. **What experience have you had with Berkeley’s Rent Stabilization Ordinance, the Rent Board’s staff and the elected Board?**

I have attended all the 4x4 Committee meetings over the past five years, gaining a strong understanding of various laws and proposals at both the Council and Rent Board. As a legislative aide, I have helped out constituents who face eviction and worked on rent reductions for those whose landlords have failed to properly maintained their unit. I have also worked with staff and the board on various proposals improving the rights of tenants. Additionally, as the current Secretary of the Berkeley Tenants Union, I have communicated with various organizations on housing and tenant issues and advocated on countless proposals sent to Council and commissions.

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

**Housing Safety**

I remember very clearly the day of June 16th, 2015, when six young people lost their lives on the same block I lived on because of poor housing conditions. While we cannot change the past, we can influence the future and prevent such tragedies from happening again. That is why I worked on proposals to improve balcony safety – proposals that are now being looked at on a statewide level. I have also worked on expanding the Rental Housing Safety Program, making tenants more aware of their rights when it comes to housing safety. Of course, we must continue our efforts to improve housing safety, as everyone should have a right to safe housing.

**Displacement/Gentrification**

I have attended various meetings over the years on the Adeline Corridor Plan, addressing the wave of gentrification in South Berkeley. In 1970, African Americans made up 23.5% of Berkeley’s population, but in 2010, that dropped to 10%, and in 2018 that number is even lower. Much of our city’s history and culture is being erased as a consequence of the housing affordability crisis, especially in South Berkeley where families who have lived there for generations are being priced out their homes. More must be done to protect our city’s diversity and culture.

**Tenant Harassment**

Too often, I receive phone calls from tenants who are being harassed by their landlord. In the current housing climate, landlords have large incentives to remove long term tenants. For example, some landlords acting in bad faith use tenant buyouts as a way to circumnavigate evictions, using pressure tactics and intimidation to force tenants to take the offer. I worked on the Tenant Buyout Ordinance which ensures that landlords cannot harass tenants when it comes to making these offers. I also crafted the Tenant Protection Ordinance, which provides tenants a series of much needed rights. It is unacceptable for someone to feel intimidated in their home, and I will strongly advocate against such harassment.

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

The role of a Rent Board Commissioner is to interpret and follow the Rent Stabilization and Eviction for Good Cause Ordinance. The powers invested in the Board include, but are not limited to, regulating rents, preventing unjust evictions, holding hearings on landlord-tenant disputes, promoting and recommending legislation to Council, ensuring compliance of regulations, and maintaining Berkeley’s diversity.

In this housing affordability crisis, more people are reaching out to the Rent Board than ever before. The staff have been doing a fantastic job, but are overwhelmed with the amount of requests. Therefore, we need to increase resources and services to ensure we can adequately advise tenants and landlords and provide outreach so tenants know their rights.

1. **What experience do you have organizing tenants? Please describe and include any thoughts you have on how to better engage Berkeley tenants.**

As the Secretary of the Berkeley Tenants Union, I have been directly involved in coordinating multiple local mobilizations on tenant issues, including mobilizations to City Council meetings on important legislation. Through BTU, I have worked on a campaign around code enforcement, going to multi-unit apartments and letting tenants know their rights (we are planning on a similar campaign again this year).

We need to have more ground campaigns, going door to door, letting tenants know their rights. This is especially true for students who are new to Berkeley and may not know local laws, and long-term tenants who have lived in their units for decades without any issues, but may one day face problems from their landlords.

1. **Market developers argue that building more market rate multifamily units is the only way to lower the price of housing.  What is your position on this theory? Please discuss your thoughts on how Berkeley can increase the housing available and affordable to tenants living on very limited income such as those living on government beneits, retirement pensions, and others with very limited resources.**

I served on the Zoning Adjustments Board during the vote to approve 2211 Harold Way, the 301 unit 100% luxury rate hi-rise. There, I laid down the facts on dismantling the theory of trickle-down economics. I rebuked the claim that developers made that it would be financially impossible to incorporate affordable housing in the project, despite 20% inclusionary housing being mandated before 2009, which was never a problem, and since then we have seen similarly sized projects with up to 50% affordable housing proposed.

Here is the reality: even if we are to accept the premise that creating more market-rate housing lowers rents, the effects of this may not be seen for decades. A 75-year-old woman living off of social security and facing eviction does not have that time to wait for rents to go down. We need a multi-pronged approach that incorporates more affordable housing now.

As a side note, I want to clarify the term “affordable”. When I hear the term, I ask, affordable for who? We are seeing a movement towards prioritizing “affordable housing” for those earning a salary $100,000 a year. This is not affordable for the single mother who must work multiple jobs to pay the rent and raise her children. This is not affordable for the senior who is on a fixed income. This is not affordable for the student or recent graduate who is drowning in student loan debt. While we should make sure people of all income levels have access to housing, we must prioritize housing for those at the lowest income levels.

1. **Is a pro‑tenant Rent Board capable of treating tenants, small, and corporate landlords fairly?**

A pro-tenant Rent Board is and has been capable of treating tenants, large and small landlords fairly. In dealing with disputes between landlords and tenants, the Board must apply the rules and regulations as written. Historically, in cases this means the Board has sided with landlords. We must continue to expand outreach to both tenants and landlords, as this will help them better understand and navigate Rent Control.

1. **How do you think rent and eviction controls are related to homelessness? Can the Rent Board have any effect on the homeless situation?**

A recent survey by the City revealed that people consider the two most important issues to be affordable housing (31%) and homelessness (27%). These two issues complement each other, and I believe that the rise in homelessness over the past few years is correlated to the rise in rents. The reality is homelessness would be significantly higher if it was not for Rent Control. I have helped out people who have lived in their homes for decades, are on a fixed income, and have been harassed by their landlord who has threatened eviction. They would have nowhere to live if they were forced out of their homes. We need to protect those who are on the verge of homelessness and help find permanent housing for those who are homeless.

I remember clearly a case of a single mother who called me saying she was being evicted and would become homeless as a result. I had worked with a team of people from multiple organizations to help her case. It pains me to say that despite everything we did, it was not enough to stop the eviction. Fortunately, we were able to connect her with emergency housing, but the situation was not ideal. This story happens every day in the region, and it is a failure of our society that this is such a common occurrence.

The Rent Board does have an effect on the homeless situation. By strengthening eviction regulations and ensuring rents are not raised too significantly, we can help stem the rise of homelessness in our community.

1. **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?**

Having interacted with many organizations in Berkeley on a multitude of issues, I have a far-reaching base of support. As a recent graduate of UC Berkeley, I have strong support in the student community, which I still regularly interact with. As the former Vice President of Membership of Cal Dems and member of the Student Labor Committee, and ASUC Housing Commission, I have established networks within various student groups. As a current boardmember of the East Bay Young Democrats, I have made connections with young professionals throughout Berkeley and the region.

I also gather support from labor activists and unions. One of the first things I did as a student at UC Berkeley was getting involved in labor issues. I have worked closely with SEIU 1021, AFSCME 3299, and other unions in fighting for increasing the minimum wage and expanding sick leave in Berkeley and other fair labor standards.

On the housing front, as the current Secretary of the Berkeley Tenants Union, I have led efforts on housing issues and advocacy of policies. For the past couple years, I have been involved with the Berkeley Homeless Task Force, working on issues such as Tiny Homes. I have attended meetings with Friends of Adeline and the Berkeley Progressive Alliance, connecting with community activists.

As a former intern of Councilmember Worthington and current staffer to Mayor Arreguin, I have cooperated with various organizations on various issues. Examples include working with the NAACP and ACLU on police accountability, Sierra Club on environmental issues, League of Women Voters and Common Cause on government transparency, just to name a few.

Having traversed the Berkeley political system, I provide knowledge and experience on how to navigate both the campaign and policy making. I will deliver the highest level of commitment and enthusiasm, bringing fresh perspectives and a strong voice to advocate for our policies.

1. **Do you support the repeal of the Costa‑Hawkins Housing Act? If it were repealed, what changes do you believe Berkeley should make to its Rent Stabilization Ordinance?**

I support the full and unconditional repeal of Costa-Hawkins. Momentum is on our side and we have a real opportunity to repeal it this November, and I am fully committed to campaigning for that. Berkeley has a long history of being the first in the nation on progressive and innovative policies. The whole state will be watching what Berkeley does in the event of a repeal of Costa-Hawkins. I have always believed that a strong form of rent control is essential to providing stability and affordability in the rental market. If repealed, we need to take immediate action to reintroduce vacancy control and expand rent control to newer construction.

1. **The Convention asks all candidates to sign a pledge NOT to 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 it is fair?**

The candidates endorsed at the Tenant Convention represent the voice of a progressive coalition. To run against the decision of our communities would be a slap in the face of our democratic process. We already are likely to experience competition from candidates who do not represent pro-tenant values, and running against a progressive slate as a progressive jeopardizes everything we work for. I will unequivocally sign a pledge not to run against or endorse against the Convention slate and I will do everything I can to get the slate elected, regardless if I am on it or not.

1. **If you are nominated by the convention, will you agree, in concert with other slate members, to hire a coordinator with full authority to make campaign decisions in consultation with the slate? The slate will retain the power to determine an overall budget and may replace the coordinator by a democratic process.**

We need to approach decision making as a team. I believe that a campaign coordinator will be an integral part of running an effective and efficient campaign. But in order for this to work, there must also be consensus from the slate as to what campaign decisions are made.