



SEATTLE CITY COUNCIL | DISTRICT 3

COUNCILMEMBER KSHAMA SAWANT

Thursday, March 26, 2020

Dear Governor Inslee,

As vulnerable renters in Seattle and Washington state struggle to cope with the COVID19 pandemic, many are starting to receive notices for rent increases from their corporate landlords. Constituents have reported this both to my office and to the Tenants Union of Washington State.

This is shockingly unconscionable. I am writing to urge you to immediately institute a statewide rent freeze through the end of the year (to be extended for longer if the economic impact of the coronavirus crisis continues in 2021).

Concretely, you should use your executive powers to protect tenants by prohibiting rent increases for month-to-month tenants, lease renewals, and new leases.

Large rent increases can be devastating even under normal conditions in this system, which exploits workers and renters while prioritizing the profits of corporate landlords and other big businesses. The reprehensible 4-decade-old statewide ban on any city or town (RCW 35.21.830) has allowed the cost of housing to balloon out of control in Seattle and statewide. Hundreds of thousands of our community members in the region have already been priced out of their homes, neighborhoods, and communities, and tens of thousands have become homeless. Communities of color, LGBTQ people, immigrants, and the disabled are disproportionately affected. In Seattle, 46 percent of tenants are currently rent-burdened.

During this pandemic, the consequences of unaffordable rent increases will be even more devastating. In the absence of guaranteed paid leave and any universal basic income, workers ordered to “shelter in place” must survive on a fraction of their usual pay while on unemployment insurance, and that is if they are lucky enough to qualify for those benefits. Beyond the immediate health impacts and loss of life from COVID19, it is becoming increasingly clear that the economy is headed for a deep recession. The Federal Reserve is predicting a second-quarter unemployment rate of 30 percent.

An organized movement of renters has recently won a 60-day moratorium on evictions, after nearly 9,000 Seattleites signed our petition. Further, a statewide movement of renters just won a 30-day moratorium on evictions. But this is far from enough, given the extent of this crisis, and given how much renters continue to be exploited by their corporate landlords.

Elected officials have a moral and political duty to ensure the burden of this serious crisis does not land on the same working people and marginalized communities who are already struggling under “normal” periods of capitalism. It would be criminal to allow landlords to carry out rent increases during this pandemic, leading to further evictions and putting public welfare and health at grave risk.

I urge you to immediately enact a rent freeze through the rest of 2020. Additionally, I urge you to suspend all rent, mortgage, and utility payments for as long as the pandemic lasts. This is the least you can do for working people, while big banks and corporations get bailed out by the Trump administration.

I urge you to take these proactive steps now to protect renters in Washington state from being priced out of their homes in this crisis.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Kshama Sawant', written in a cursive style.

Councilmember Kshama Sawant, District 3