

Talk of Freeze on Condo Conversions Builds; Worried about the loss of apartments, two L.A. councilmen urge action. Not all colleagues are convinced the strategy is the right one.

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ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

Last week Councilman Alex Padilla called for a moratorium in his district in the northeast San Fernando Valley. On Tuesday, Councilman Bill Rosendahl asked for one in his Westside district, which has led the city in conversions over the last five years.

In his first year in office, one of the thorniest problems facing Rosendahl has been the eviction of dozens of tenants from the Lincoln Place apartments in Venice after a years-long dispute over condo conversions. Condo conversion has been extensive in Rosendahl's district, which includes Venice, Mar Vista, Playa del Rey, West Los Angeles, Brentwood and Pacific Palisades.

FULL TEXT

Confronted by a heated housing market and several high-profile mass evictions, some **Los Angeles City Council members have begun pressing for a freeze on converting apartment buildings into pricey condominiums.**

Last week Councilman Alex Padilla called for a moratorium in his district in the northeast San Fernando Valley. On Tuesday, Councilman Bill Rosendahl asked for one in his Westside district, which has led the city in conversions over the last five years.

"Why should [living near] the ocean be just for the rich? It should be for everybody," Rosendahl said. A one-year moratorium, he said, would slow conversions and give city officials time to develop other strategies.

Any such restriction would need City Council approval.

Many housing activists and developers agree that the city has a **housing shortage** and that some of the neediest seniors and people on fixed incomes would have **nowhere to go if they were kicked out of their rent-controlled apartments.**

The argument is over what to do about it. Moratorium opponents – including some skeptical members of the council – think freezes don't work, have unintended consequences and don't address the core problem: the city's paltry supply of affordable housing.

For Padilla and Rosendahl, neither of whom has offered a specific plan, **the idea of the moratorium is to stave off any more evictions while developing a proposal.**

In his first year in office, one of the thorniest problems facing Rosendahl has been the eviction of dozens of tenants from the Lincoln Place apartments in Venice after a years-long dispute over condo conversions.

Such conversions are hard to restrict, because the state Ellis Law essentially gives apartment owners the right to go out of business and either redevelop their properties as condos or sell to a developer who will.

One city that has had some success in dealing with the problem is San Francisco, which uses a lottery system to regulate the number of condo conversions allowed each year.

Some in Los Angeles' business community dislike the idea of a moratorium.

"The city is starting to sound very shrill to the business community, because every issue requires something being

done on an emergency basis -- whether it's a supermarket wage or stopping condo conversions," said Larry Kosmont, president of Kosmont Cos., a Los Angeles-based developer.

"I think the city is taking on a finger-in-a-dike strategy: You plug up the problem with a quick press conference, and there is no real strategy."

Kosmont said the city could boost its housing stock by creating zones in which developers would be encouraged to build more apartments with moderate rents -- something that he believes has worked well in other cities but is anathema in Los Angeles because of concerns over traffic.

Another developer, Kate Bartolo, a senior vice president with the Kor Group, suggested that a multi-pronged approach was needed.

Among other things, she said, the city should crack down on those who abuse the condo conversion laws, reform rent-control so it provides affordable units to those who most need it and ease zoning on commercial corridors to allow more apartment buildings.

Condo conversion has been extensive in Rosendahl's district, which includes Venice, Mar Vista, Playa del Rey, West Los Angeles, Brentwood and Pacific Palisades.

According to his office, 1,051 rental units have been approved to be converted to condos in the last five years and 370 are in the application process.

Rosendahl campaigned last year on a slow-growth platform, saying his district needed to fix its traffic problems before allowing more development. On Tuesday, the councilman said he was not against all development but wanted to stop condo conversions.

Because of community resistance, one recurrent problem on the Westside is finding places to build.

Rosendahl ruled out allowing any of the sprawling Department of Veterans Affairs grounds in Brentwood to be used as a housing site, even though the federal government has been pushing to develop it.

And the councilman again voiced reservations about further development at Playa Vista, because of environmental concerns.

Not everyone on the council agrees with his and Padilla's strategy. Councilwoman Wendy Greuel said that she has been approached about possible support for a moratorium but that she has decided it probably wouldn't work.

Instead, she said, she is pushing a pair of motions by council President Eric Garcetti and her that would try to crack down on building owners who evict tenants to clear the way for condos and then change their minds.

And she has another concern: the law of unintended consequences.

"My staff has indicated if you put a moratorium on condo conversions right now, what would happen is that owners would simply tear down" apartment buildings under state law "and rebuild them as pricier apartments or new condos," Greuel said.

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