Chicago activists stage dramatic protest against law prohibiting rent control

A coalition of Chicago community groups said it's time for rent control in Illinois.

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On Wednesday, Chicago community activists are pressing Gov. Bruce Rauner (R) to support the repeal of a law that prohibits rent control. Advocates for rent control went to the James R. Thompson Center in Chicago, where the House offices of Illinois state government are located, with sleeping bags and blankets, as the governor delivered his state of the state speech in Springfield.
The coalition that organized the action, Lift the Ban Coalition, which is made up of 20 community groups, said it wants to draw attention to the large numbers of Illinois residents who are rent-burdened.

Twenty-seven percent of renters in Illinois are “severely burdened” by housing expenses or spend more than 30 percent of their income on rent, according to a 2016 analysis by Make Room, an advocacy organization that raises awareness of affordable housing issues. In Cook County, the problem is particularly glaring. Fifty-three percent of renters are paying more than what is appropriate for their
incomes, according to a 2017 study from the Institute for Housing Studies at DePaul University.

Seventy-nine percent of the renters making below $18,946 a year are giving half of their income to rent, according to the same study. Over 85 percent of people with incomes under $31,500 have put more than 30 percent of their income into rent. This means a lot of people are living together in small apartments to save on rent. In the Chicago metro area, 32.4 percent of adults live together, which is up from 27.4 percent in 2000, according to an analysis released in December from Zillow.

It’s also a national problem. According to a 2017 report from Harvard’s Joint Center for Housing Studies, nearly 39 million households can’t afford their housing. New York, New Jersey, Maryland, California and Washington, D.C. have rent control regulations, but most states don’t. Many states have laws that prohibit the passage of rent control laws.
On the March primary ballot, voters in 10 of Chicago’s wards will be asked if they support rent control. The Lift the Ban Coalition went door to door to get 3,800 signatures to put the issue on the ballot. State representative Will Guzzardi (D), has introduced a bill that would repeal the law — and two gubernatorial candidates have both said they support the bill.

The repeal faces opposition, however, since realtors have fought for the law since the 1970s and ALEC, which drafts a lot of model state legislation for Republicans, came up with the idea. Rauner, a Republican governor, is unlikely to take a public stand against the law.

“Communities are essentially becoming unaffordable,” Jamanza Malone, a leader in the Lift the Ban Coalition and executive director of the Kenwood Oakland Community Organization, told Chicago Tonight earlier this month. “While household incomes have remained stagnant, rents have continued to increase and this preemptive ban on rent control has made it impossible for municipalities like Chicago to adequately address the situation.”

J.W. Mason, an economics professor at the John Jay College of Criminal Justice in New York told Chicago Reader that rent control is about more than providing affordable housing, like allowing long-term residents to stay where they are. Mason said that long-term residents can also contribute to a rise in property values because they invest in neighborhood businesses and institutions.

“There’s an actual economic argument that says when the value of housing in a neighborhood goes up, a major reason is because of the people who are already living there. They should get some benefit from that and not be displaced,” Mason told Chicago Reader.

“I believe we need rent control to keep families from being displaced from our neighborhoods,” a resident of the Pilsen neighborhood, Jose Padilla of the Pilsen Alliance, said at the center on Wednesday. “It’s not fair. We’re being moved from our neighborhoods because they don’t want us in our neighborhoods.”
A Pilsen resident is speaking about skyrocketing rent for #LiftTheBan. See the video at pscp.tv/w/bUCP4zFkdktP…
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