

Written Comments on Proposed Just Cause Charter Change

Burlington Charter Change Committee

Erhard Mahnke, Burlington Resident

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Good afternoon Chair Shannon, Councilors Freeman and Stromberg, and Attorney Blackwood! Thanks for the opportunity to speak on this important issue.

For the record my name is Erhard Mahnke and I live at 60 Grove Street. I've been a Burlington resident for over 40 years and during that time have been involved in the community in ways too numerous to mention, including as a City Councilor and Council President. I've been around long enough to have worked on the last Just Cause effort back in the late 80's.

My wife Sydney and I own a duplex and rent the upstairs apartment, so we are small-time landlords ourselves. In addition, I've been a community board member of Northgate Apartments for over 30 years. At 336 apartments, Northgate is the largest rental complex in the state and is wholly resident owned and controlled. Through both my personal life and profession as a longtime housing advocate, I have extensive experience with property management, Vermont landlord-tenant law, and housing policy at the local, state and federal levels.

I'm here today to speak as both a landlord and housing advocate who supports Just Cause eviction. I believe housing is a basic human need and right. Renters need the same safe, stable housing that homeowners have access to. Their apartments are their homes!

Housing is foundational. Housing instability has well-documented negative impacts on families, children and individual renters. As taxpayers, we all end up paying for those impacts in terms of increased social services, homelessness, health care, special education, mental health, and criminal justice. Just cause will provide good tenants who pay the rent, keep their apartments in good shape, and don't cause problems with their neighbors the kind of housing stability that everyone needs as a platform for a successful, independent life.

Frankly I fail to understand what responsible landlords who run their property in a business-like manner are afraid of.

Non-profits like Northgate have run their properties with Just Cause leases for years. Our property managers screen prospective tenants appropriately and when there's a problem, they go the extra mile to work things out. Rarely do we have to resort to eviction, and then only as a last resort. As long as a resident abides by the lease, their lease renews every year. We have families that have raised their children at Northgate, their children have moved away when they became adults and came back to raise families of their own. Long term stable tenancies are one of the keys to successful property management and ownership.

A few additional points:

- ***Our city, county and state suffer from a well-documented, chronic affordable housing shortage.*** In this environment evicting someone without good cause needlessly precipitates a crisis for them and their family as they search for replacement housing in our extremely challenging market. If they are low-income, working at a low-wage job or living on fixed income, there is a high likelihood that they will become homeless.
- ***No cause evictions are an easy way to hide discrimination*** against Black and Indigenous people and other People of Color, as well as families with children, people with disabilities, people who

identify as transgendered or non-binary, and folks in other classes protected under Fair Housing Law. Eliminating no-cause evictions will help prevent illegal housing discrimination.

- **Many jurisdictions have had Just Cause on the books for years** without causing crisis in their rental markets – New Jersey, Washington, DC, San Francisco, Seattle, Oakland, to name a few.
- **This is the beginning of a potentially long process; passing the Charter Change does not actually enact Just Cause.** Charter Changes by their nature need to provide broad authorization for a municipality to do something that is not currently in the powers granted to it by the state. All the details remain to be worked out if this is passed by the voters and the Legislature.
- **The questions people have raised can be addressed in the final ordinance.** For instance many jurisdictions have created an exemption for a landlord or family member that wants to occupy a rental unit. This and the other concerns that have been raised are all issues that remain to be worked out once the Charter Change has been enacted, not reasons to oppose Just Cause now. Passing the Charter Change is what allows us to have those conversations.

Lastly, I have heard a lot of misinformation being spread and unfortunately a good deal of fear mongering. I ask my fellow landlords to please stop. This is not the end of the world. If you run your property in a business-like manner, screen well and keep your property in good shape, you will be rewarded by long-term, stable and grateful tenants.

Thanks again for your time and the opportunity to comment! I wish you all the best as you consider this important protection for Burlington's renters.