

After ballot question exposed a divided front, rent control gets renewed push on Beacon Hill

By [Matt Stout](#) Globe Staff, Updated November 14, 2023, 4:33 p.m.

After the collapse of a divisive ballot question campaign, proponents of reviving rent control in Massachusetts returned Tuesday to making their case to the state Legislature, where supporters acknowledge that Democratic leaders remain deeply skeptical of erasing the state's three-decade ban.

The Legislature's housing committee heard hours of testimony from tenants, housing advocates, real estate leaders, and elected officials on proposals to allow cities and towns to limit rent increases if they so choose.

Among the bills considered was Mayor Michelle Wu's [proposal to cap rent increases](#) in the city — though the mayor herself did not testify in person. Meanwhile, a housing justice coalition rallied in front of the State House, where tenants outlined their battles to remain in their homes amid escalating rents.

But the chorus of voices urging lawmakers to revive rent control belies what has been a divided front among the policy's supporters. A campaign to put a question before voters next year to lift the 1994 law banning rent control in Massachusetts [ended last week](#) — far short of the ballot — when state Representative Mike Connolly, a Cambridge Democrat, said it had collected fewer than 11,000 signatures, a fraction of the 75,000 it needed by a Nov. 22 deadline.

Some of the ballot measure's biggest opponents, however, were the very supporters pushing for a return of rent control Tuesday.

Housing justice coalition Homes for All Massachusetts, which organized Tuesday's event, had for months called on Connolly to drop the effort, saying he decided his course unilaterally. State Representative David Rogers, a Cambridge Democrat who filed a bill to give towns and cities [a local rent control option](#), said Tuesday that the ballot question push was “poorly organized” and, while well-intentioned, an “unhelpful distraction.”

Others feared the campaign — and the divisions it exposed — only hurt their cause.

“It doesn't look good for us in any sort of way because it makes us look like our campaign isn't strong and doesn't have backing,” said state Representative Sam Montaña, a Jamaica Plain Democrat who sponsored both Wu's [legislative plan](#) and the wider effort with Rogers to offer a local option.

Such pushback surprised even Connolly, who, if successful in getting the question before voters, would have also faced a well-funded real estate industry that [pledged to spend tens of millions to defeat it](#).

“I can say, quite frankly, there were more professional rent control advocates working to stop the signature drive than there ever was paid staff working to organize the signature drive,” Connolly said outside the State House on Tuesday. “We understood going into the ballot question process that there was work to do to build consensus. What we didn't anticipate was the active opposition.”

Supporters face a tough road in the Legislature, too, where [landlords outnumber renters](#) and Democratic leaders have shown little appetite for the policy.

Housing and tenant advocates, however, point to shifting public opinion, with [various public polls](#) showing support for rent control's return. That is a dramatic change, said Michael Kane, executive director of the Mass. Alliance of HUD Tenants, which he said has been advocating for reinstating rent control since the mid-1990s.

“You mention rent control [then] and they thought you were ISIS,” Kane told lawmakers Tuesday, referencing the terror group. “We know the resistance in the leadership up here.”

Renters painted a stark picture Tuesday of the difficulty they face in keeping up with the region's ever-climbing cost of living. People spoke of choosing

between paying rent or medications, or fearing their building or complex will be sold to new owners, who could quickly jack up prices. A 93-year-old woman living in an Athol manufactured home community implored lawmakers to enact rent control “before I decide to leave this world.”

“Rent control is the only housing policy that can have the immediate impact needed,” said Nicole McClain, a Lynn city councilor, who said her son couldn’t afford rising rents in the North Shore city, ultimately pushing him and his family to Springfield.

Wu, in written testimony she submitted to the committee, said her proposal to limit annual rent increases to 6 percent plus inflation — with an overall cap of 10 percent in high inflation years — would ultimately impact about 55 percent of rental properties after exempting some smaller owner-occupied properties and new construction.

“This home-rule petition takes a balanced approach to immediately protect renters against the most egregious, excessive rent increases that push families out,” she wrote, “while also continuing to empower housing production to create new homes across the city.”

Opponents disagree. Wu’s measure and other proposals have drawn stiff opposition from landlords and real estate leaders, who argue rent control would stunt housing production and discourage upkeep on rental units. As a result, they argue, it would drive down what cities and towns collect in property tax, which, in Boston, accounts for [74 percent](#) of the city’s revenue.

“You don’t want to go down that road and repeat the same mistakes that have been made multiple times in the last century,” said Shlomo Pinkas, a board member of the Small Property Owners Association.

Should the Legislature not act this session or next, Montañó, the Jamaica Plain Democrat, suggested a possible path would be to put the question before voters in 2026, arguing that “two years is enough time to plan.”

“It’s complicated. I’m not really sure that we’ll be able to advance this in the Legislature,” Montañó said. “When I go talk to people in the House about it, there’s a lot of hesitation. There are a lot of folks who said, ‘We voted on this 30 years ago now. There’s no reason to bring it back.’”

“But,” Montañó said, “I think we’re in a different place. We have to make the moral decision.”