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Room for rent improvement

EVEN CITY COUNCILOR Sam Yoon, a newcomer to the council, knows that any effort to set limits on Boston landlords is probably headed for the legislative boneyard. And that's the probable outcome tomorrow when the council is scheduled to take up Yoon's proposed ordinance requiring landlords of large buildings to attend periodic bargaining sessions with tenant unions or face possible denial of tax credits and city permits.

Yoon's proposal is well intentioned but impractical. The city's median advertised rent of \$1,400 for a two-bedroom apartment badly prices out families with low and moderate incomes. But Yoon's ordinance is more a reflection of frustration than a realistic way to prevent rent gouging or to increase housing production. Perhaps there would be some satisfaction in forcing recalcitrant owners of buildings with 10 or more units to the table for discussions on rent increases, repairs, or code violations. But the ordinance doesn't require any action on the part of the landlord other than that they show up. Tenants would be better off familiarizing themselves with the law that enables them to withhold rent in cases of unaddressed code violations.

Boston enjoyed a limited form of rent control beginning in the 1970s that didn't alienate taxpayers or abuse small property owners. But it was crushed by a statewide ballot initiative in 1994, along with the more

heavy-handed bylaws in Cambridge and Brookline. The big housing production boom predicted by rent control opponents never arrived, however, to rescue low-income renters.

Boston could have benefited from a reasonable rent stabilization bylaw like the one proposed in 2004. It would have allowed low-income and elderly tenants only to appeal annual rent increases above 5 percent. The proposal thoughtfully exempted all construction from 2002 forward to encourage new supply. It got shot down by the City Council. But it stood for something tangible.

There are still ways to help needy tenants or expand the number of affordable apartments in Boston without adopting rent controls. Barry Bluestone, director of the Center for Urban and Regional Policy at Northeastern University, recommends a housing voucher finance system similar to the one in Illinois, where officials assess a \$20 fee on most real estate transactions. Bluestone estimates that the state could set aside more than \$10 million annually for such a trust fund. Another solution might be for Bostonians to subsidize the construction of more inexpensive housing by adopting a small surcharge on property taxes through passage of the Community Preservation Act.

If Boston's supply of affordable apartments grew substantially, Yoon and others wouldn't be looking to regulate rents.