

## Free Pacifica from the Forces Behind the Indicted Signature Gatherers

On March 8, 2018 the San Mateo County Superior Court indicted two individuals for falsifying signatures. The signature gatherers were hired by the California Apartment Association (CAA). In many towns across the Bay Area, the Griffiths Olson company—which hired the two indicted signature gatherers—ran campaigns that involved intimidation and bullying.

In Pacifica, this happened in the run-up to the Measure C campaign. Pacifica City Council passed a moratorium on rent increases until Measure C was voted on, so that renters would not experience extreme rent increases during the campaign. The moratorium was a normal ordinance, not an emergency measure, meaning it could be passed with only three votes (Sue Vaterlaus and Mike O'Neill voted no). Accordingly, it could not take effect until 30 days after it was approved. During this time the signature gatherers went to work.

The purpose of the signature gathering was to cancel the moratorium. The signature gatherers never told people this. Instead, they said it was to put rent stabilization on the ballot, even though City Council had already placed it on the ballot by another ordinance. CAA, which paid for the signature gathering, was doing all it could to keep renters from being protected. There were only 63 signatures over what was needed after 1,100 signatures were not accepted by the election board. Once many people who felt they had been lied to rescinded their signatures, there were 66 withdrawal letters, but 50 were not accepted by the City Clerk because they were presented two hours after the petitioners closed the drive. The result was that the moratorium was stopped and, as expected, many renters received \$600/month rent increases, and some received more than that. The petition drive was fraudulent and its outcome hurt our community.

Peninsula cities are enduring a critically broken housing market with skyrocketing rents, no-fault evictions, wrenching displacement, and rampant speculation. In the face of this crisis, with local communities searching for answers, bad actors like CAA and San Mateo County Association of Realtors (SAMCAR) and the politicians they fund undermine our earnest efforts to find legitimate solutions to this crisis.

CAA and SAMCAR and their state and national allies demonstrate a consistent pattern of interfering with the local struggle to protect middle- and lower-income renters. In attempting to protect their own narrow interests, these real estate groups exhibit a willingness to divide our communities and corrupt our norms. Their tactics include denigration of tenants, fearmongering, lies, intimidation, and use of aggressive consultants who encourage hostile behaviors. These strategies and dirty tricks have been used in local cities, including Pacifica, Redwood City, San Mateo, Burlingame, Mountain View, Richmond, Alameda, Oakland, and Santa Rosa. Examples from around the county include:

- Signature gatherers hired by CAA forged voter signatures to defeat a City Council's ordinance to protect renters.
- In April 2017, SAMCAR sent a letter to Pacifica residents disparaging renters and presenting misinformation about the impacts of rent control.

- Physical threats were directed at grassroots renter advocates by CAA representatives, who lied openly about the true intent of the petitions they were asking voters to sign.
- Misleading mailers sent to voters included unauthorized use of the California Legislative Analyst's Office's logo, implying that the agency had performed a negative analysis of tenant protection measures in multiple cities.
- Ads run in multiple media portrayed renters as shady characters, criminals, and drug users.

These organizations and their allies spent millions of dollars to buttress false claims. In the face of so many misdeeds, it is apparent that CAA and SAMCAR are working solely in their own interests, regardless of the harm to our communities. It is worth noting that many landlords and realtors are embarrassed by these strategies and do not condone them. We call upon our elected officials to distance themselves from CAA and SAMCAR, and refrain from taking campaign contributions from them. We also call on our elected officials to work seriously to solve the crisis in affordable housing, and to not look to these organizations or those who take donations from them as credible sources of information.

We hope to restore integrity to our political processes and ensure that the voices of everyone in the community can be heard. Only then will our cities move forward toward meaningful solutions to our communities' housing needs.

**Monica Olsen**