



City of San Antonio

Agenda Memorandum

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Agenda Item Number: 2

Agenda Date: 11/2/2020

In Control: Culture and Neighborhood Services Committee

DEPARTMENT: Neighborhood and Housing Services

DEPARTMENT HEAD: Verónica R. Soto, FAICP, Neighborhood and Housing Services Department Director

COUNCIL DISTRICTS IMPACTED: City wide

SUBJECT: Briefing and Possible Action on the Proposed Renters Commission Survey and Focus Group Feedback

SUMMARY:

Discussion on the feedback received from the Renters' Commission survey and focus groups regarding the establishment of a proposed Renters' Commission

BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

A Council Consideration Request (CCR) was sponsored by Councilmember Treviño on June 19, 2019 requesting a discussion of the creation of a Renters' Commission. The proposed Commission would advise the City Council on matters related to rental housing including housing production, accessibility, renter laws/rights, public health and safety, and other matters that impact renters and landlords. The Governance Committee referred the CCR to the Culture & Neighborhood Services Committee (CNSC) on January 15, 2020. Public engagement previously scheduled for March 2020 was delayed due to the pandemic.

ISSUE:

Staff will provide an update on the proposed creation of a Renters' Commission and next steps.

A survey had been released through SASpeakUp to gather information from the community. Concurrently, stakeholder focus groups were held during the first weeks of October to discuss the issues and makeup of a commission or similar group.

Both the survey and the focus groups requested information from renters and property managers, with the survey allowing for customized questions upon clicking options.

Outreach of the survey was done from September 14 through October 29, 2020. Staff distributed the survey through Council Offices, Housing Commission, COSA texts, and COSA social media channels. The survey was also shared directly with applicants and landlord participants in the Emergency Housing Assistance Program, Right to Counsel program, ForEveryoneHome initiative, and NHSD monthly email distribution list.

The survey contained twenty questions with various topics including knowledge on city rental policies, eviction, housing discrimination, and what experiences or backgrounds the proposed commission members should have.

As of October 27, the survey received 3,623 responses. 1,649 responses were from renters, 1,510 from homeowners, and 836 from property owner/landlords. The survey provided options to click on more than one box, prompting most respondents to click at least two boxes. If a respondent clicked on “Property Manager” or “landlord” boxes only, it would prompt them to customized questions related to property management. If they selected “renter” only, they would receive questions geared towards renters.

The survey found that an 53 % of respondents indicated they were not familiar with current rental issues and policies. 43% said they were unsure if renters are sufficiently represented on boards and commissions. 41% of renters were said they did not feel sufficiently represented.

Survey results also indicated general support for the commission to include a mix of renters and property owners. 12% of responses selected they would like the commission to be made of renters only, while 85% said they would prefer to expand the representation (29% for both renters and landlords and 56% for various combinations of renters and other housing professionals). 3% were neutral or had no opinion.

Respondents requested renter representation include experience renting from all types of units-including single family homes, mobile homes, student housing, senior housing, and people experiencing homelessness.

Two focus groups were held on October 14 and 15, one in the evening for renters and the following morning with property managers/landlords. The focus group discussion centered on the following questions:

- What are some challenges renters face?
- How could a Renters’ Commission solve the challenges?
- What would be critical for the renters’ commission to succeed?

The focus groups found that both renters and landlords are not properly educated on rights and responsibilities. A proposed renters’ commission should be advocating about educational programs to assist both renters and small landlords for positive experiences.

Both groups responded that there should be an effort to teach young adults about renters’ responsibilities, financials, and landlord responsibilities prior to them renting for the first time. Both groups felt that not knowing how to properly manage rent and expenses early on results in long term consequences such as evictions and bad credit that inhibit renting later on.

Both groups also felt that property owners that purchased investment properties with no experience in renting or management needed to be educated on landlord responsibilities and renter policy. The lack of knowledge regarding what their responsibilities lead to bad experiences for renters and put all landlords in a bad light. Providing training and resources will improve experiences for both parties.

Both groups shared experiences that reflected the issues that were addressed. Both also requested the City provide legal guidance to ensure recommendations did not violate state restrictions.

Though both groups addressed similar issues and solutions, where they differed was in the structure of the proposed Commission. The renters' focus group responded heavily in favor to the Commission being renter only with workgroups or committees consisting of property managers. Participants felt that being renter-only would allow open discussion from the group. It would provide a safe space for residents to address issues. Opposing views in the group highlighted the need for landlords to be part of the solutions being proposed as well as many landlords that were previously renters and can speak to both experiences.

The property manager focus group recommended the Commission be evenly split between renters and landlords. Having a split group would provide view points from both sides. The group felt that not having representation would create one-sided decisions without insight on the industry.

Staff will use this data and Council Committee feedback to inform a recommendation that can be brought back to the Culture and Neighborhood Services Committee.

ALTERNATIVES:

This item is for briefing and discussion purposes only.

FISCAL IMPACT:

There is no fiscal impact associated with this request at this time.

RECOMMENDATION:

This item is for briefing and discussion purposes only. Staff will return to the Committee in December or January with staff's recommendations and go to full Council for approval in early 2021.