Seattle Mayor Durkan allows winter eviction ban to become law, proposes more funding for prevention

By Carol O'Brien
Seattle Times staff reporter

Seattle Mayor Jenny Durkan is allowing the City Council's recommendations on some residential evictions to become law. At the same time, the mayor is proposing that the city spend $720,000 on eviction prevention services next year.

Durkan opposed the amendments passed by Councilmembertlorrae Sussan and could not challenge the legislation that was governor's cabinet-approved on Nov. 8, but the council could have voted to override her veto.

Instead, the mayor has retained the legislation to the City Council without signatures, removing her concerns but not standing in its way. In a news release Thursday, Durkan argued her proposed budget for funding eviction services would do more good.

That plan also has the mayor trying to make an impact on the eviction questions and take job politics off the city's overcrowded streets with Seattle's hard-hitting prevention program.

"A moratorium, combined with about $240,000 in private donations, could help an eviction prevention program such as United Way's Home Base serve additional 1,000 low-income Seattle winter clients," Durkan said. "That's how many evictions are prevent in the winter in Seattle.

"Being proactive means more than talking," the mayor said in a statement apparently directed at Senator. "If the City Council wants to improve our shared goal of preventing evictions, then they should pass a bill that actually helps people living here now.

Councilmember Ariane Levine will champion the new proposal, he said. "We need to do everything we can to keep people inside," he said.

The city's moratorium will take effect on a pause-evictions begins Dec. 1, March 1 by providing tenants covered by the law with a defense in court.

It will apply to tenancies at or below the area median income who rent at least part of a home, or rent in any other room in a one-bedroom home. It will not apply to tenants above the median income, or tenants who engage in criminal or nuisance activities. It also won't apply to tenants who are evicted by a landlord for non-payment of rent, or in a housing court.

Landlords will still be able to file evictions during the winter, opposing tenants to respond to court rules in the tenant's tenancy. Tenants prevented under the legislation will still have to pay rent for missed rent, and landlords will still be able to evict them in March. Predictors say the moratorium was needed to keep people struggling to make ends meet from being harmed over the winter and during the coldest and wettest months of the year.

Sussan initially proposed legislation that would also have covered the months of November and March. Other council members voted to retain the period and added exceptions.

Landlord groups opposed the legislation, arguing more rental assistance would better serve the tenants and wean some tenants from being evicted to make ends meet, and could make Seattle in a costly legal battle.

She retained those positions Monday in a letter to the City Clerk.

"I would rather spend these dollars distributing directly helping families," Durkan wrote, adding, "It's hard to see waste by the public when the council's legislation has been to protect our vulnerable tenants, particularly those who could slip into homelessness."

Sign up for Evening Brief

Different headlines, the same insight. Get a quick round-up of the day's top stories every evening in your inbox.

Interested in more news like this? Sign up for the Seattle Times news podcasts.

In an interview, Sussan said Durkan's continued criticisms of the winter moratorium is "to restructure a designated representation of the community's landlordility.

She said the mayor's proposal, arguing the pause to house evictions put pressure on landlords to take action. "When people fight for progressive measures they end up signing off more progressive measures, as well," Sussan said.

The moratorium program was opposed by the United Way of King County and was launched last year with money from private donors such as the Seattle Housing Trust. It provides qualified tenancy advice for emergency rental assistance, case workers and volunteer legal representation.

Homeless residents face more than two dozen houses across King County eviction cases every year, including several hundred in Seattle, according to the mayor's office.

The mayor and council budgeted $5 million this year for other emergency rental assistance programs run by various nonprofits.

Durkan said Tuesday she intends to urge the council to add $720,000 on eviction prevention services. The measure would also give the city $1.5 million each year to help fund the new program.

The council is now expected to hear from the city’s legal advisor about measures to ensure the bill’s effect.

Daniel Rootson
10/07/2019 11:18 AM
at durston@seattletimes.com
on Twitter

The Seattle Times staff reporter Daniel Rootson covers Seattle city law and local politics.