

Nicole Zimmerman



Testimony in Support of the HOME Act (Bill 16-23)

I live in Silver Spring (District 4) and am a renter and I urge you to pass the HOME Act (Bill 16-23) to provide real rent stabilization to renters and communities in Montgomery County. I oppose the “Anti-gouging bill” (15-23).

I am an organizer with the Montgomery County Democratic Socialists of America and I've helped organize six renter canvasses, along with partners in the Montgomery County Racial Equity Network. Those experiences talking with tenants, as well as my own experiences as a renter inform my support for the HOME Act.

When I started to think about why I support rent stabilization and the HOME Act, I came up with a few reasons:

1) I've benefitted from stable rents and that has allowed me to put down roots here in Silver Spring.

I grew up in Howard County, went to college in southern Maryland and almost immediately moved to Silver Spring after graduating from college. For two years, I rented a group house in downtown Silver Spring. Our landlord, who owned maybe one or two other properties, would either increase our rent by the voluntary rent guideline or would not bother to increase rent at all. I am not sure how exactly she determined the original rent when she bought the house in the mid-2000s. But the result was that the rent was below market rate by the time I moved in in 2014. People who lived in the house would often stay as they could before they moved out to live with the partner that they ended up marrying because it was a good deal and they had no other reason to leave. As a result, people who lived in this house developed close bonds from living together for years and still continue to see each other to this day. This community was part of the reason I wanted to stay in Silver Spring, even as I was still figuring out my career and I could've just as easily moved to Baltimore, where many of my friends from college live. I have a lot of friends who have lived in group situations over the years, but I do not know of many others who have a community like this and I think the stable rent contributed to this. I eventually convinced my sister, and in turn, my brother-in-law to move to Silver Spring and I now live with them and pay rent so that they (both public school educators) can afford their mortgage.

2) Rents shouldn't vary significantly by month or the time of the year.

Now, my partner and I are considering renting together in Silver Spring. I receive updates from Zillow and real estate companies and I've noticed that rental prices for certain apartment buildings in the area can vary by hundreds of dollars a month, depending on the day, month or time of year, forcing prospective tenants to game the system to get the best deal and advantaging tenants with the most time to search for apartments or flexibility in moving. I

suspect that these seemingly random changes in rent are set by an algorithm designed to maximize the rents that tenants will pay (see ProPublica article from October 2022)¹.

The end result is that tenants could end up paying significantly less or more than their neighbors for similar units. The HOME Act would provide price fairness for rentals by limiting how much landlords can vary rents over the year.

3) The justification for the anti-gouging bill is based on false premises.

One of the reasons the sponsors have given for putting forward the anti-gouging bill is that this bill will be paired with increased rental assistance so that rental assistance will cover the cost of rent increases of 10 or 15%. Yet, as the 2023 session of the Maryland General Assembly winds down, it seems increasingly likely that the state will not fund emergency rental assistance. In this scenario, it seems more fiscally prudent for the county to instead use its authorities to limit rent increases substantially, preempting the need for state funds to cover significant rent increases.

Thank you for reviewing my testimony. I've lived in Montgomery County for close to ten years now as a renter and I plan to stay here for the foreseeable future. I see passing the HOME Act as one, but an important part, of making Montgomery County a more affordable and equitable place to live and I hope you'll act quickly to pass this bill.

¹ <https://www.propublica.org/article/yardstar-rent-increase-realtor-rent>