

MATTHEW HOY

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San Luis Obispo’s rental inspections program is the wrong solution

HIGHLIGHTS

Less intrusive and less constitutionally suspect solutions are available

Cal Poly needs to build student housing first, before increasing enrollment

If more housing was available, slumlords would have to improve their properties to get tenants



BY MATTHEW HOY
Special to The Tribune

The city of San Luis Obispo’s new rental housing program is the governmental equivalent of using a sledgehammer to crush a cockroach.

It shouldn’t surprise anyone that there’s a problem with some of the rental properties in the city. It’s also not a new problem.

As a senior at Cal Poly more than two decades ago, my mother called the house I rented with three other students the Hathaway Hovel. There were no screens on the windows. If we wanted to turn the wall heater on, we used a length of wire with alligator clips to complete the circuit — there was no thermostat.

There are plenty of solutions to this problem that don’t involve an intrusive new inspection regime with a half-million dollar price tag that will drive up the city’s already astronomical housing costs.

When the only tool you have is a hammer (more government), every problem looks like a nail.

It’s not like the state of California has been run for the past 20 years by evil Republicans out of Tom Fuls’ fevered imagination; the state has some of the country’s strongest tenants rights laws.

A more reasonable approach to this problem would’ve been to:

- Focus existing code enforcement resources on the worst offenders, instead of targeting trash cans visible from the street.
- Work with Cal Poly to educate student renters about their rights under both California law and the city’s housing regulations.
- Provide mediation services should landlord/tenant disputes arise over the condition of rental housing within the city.

Instead, a 3-2 council majority decided upon an intrusive program of dubious constitutionality.

Mayor Jan Marx’s [statement](#) that she’s “not worried about the theoretical unconstitutionality” of the ordinance is odious and not something that should be tolerated in an elected official who swore an oath to defend the Constitution.

The fact that other cities have similar programs only indicates that they have not yet offended a wealthy landlord or drawn the eye of a public interest law firm. A similar law in Portsmouth, Ohio, was [struck down by a federal court last year](#).

Code enforcement supervisor [Teresa Purrington](#)’s claim that invoking one’s Fourth Amendment right to be free of unreasonable searches is sufficient evidence to support a warrant application should draw gales of laughter from any judge asked to sign off on such a document.

Substandard rental housing, however, is only a symptom of the real problem in the city: a dearth of affordable housing.

For decades, the city has had an official and unofficial policy of limiting growth in an effort to maintain the character of the community. This misguided effort — the character of the community resides almost exclusively in the downtown area around Higuera Street — has created a situation where housing prices only seem reasonable when compared to San Francisco.

The monthly payment on a 30-year mortgage at 3.75 percent and 20 percent down on the median-priced home (\$622,000) in San Luis Obispo is more than \$2,700 including taxes and insurance. Experts suggest that housing costs total no more than one-third of your income, so that mortgage would require an after-tax income of nearly \$100,000 a year.

This effectively prices the middle class out of the city.

This slow-growth policy also means that rental housing can’t be built fast enough to meet demand.

Cal Poly is, belatedly, making an effort to help.

From 2010 to 2015 (the last year for which data is available), [Cal Poly’s enrollment increased by more than 2,500 students](#) to just under 21,000. The campus only has housing available for 7,377 students. The Housing South project slated to open in fall 2018 will house another 1,475.

Cal Poly should have waited until the additional housing was built before increasing its enrollment by 2,500 students.

Cal Poly officials have indicated that they intend enrollment levels to remain at just under 21,000 students for the next few years. That’s good, but in the future, on-campus student housing should be built first, and increased enrollment follow. Not the other way around.

The city should move to do what it can to encourage the construction of more housing, both for students and others who cannot afford the city’s sky-high prices.

The worst offenders when it comes to substandard housing in the city only get away with it because there’s nothing else available at affordable prices. The dumps would remain vacant if more quality, affordable housing was available. Landlords would invest money to improve their properties if that was the only way they could get tenants.

And for you students, and others, who may soon have a city code enforcement officer on your doorstep asking to come in and take a look around: Tell them to pound sand. Remember that moment when you vote for politicians who promise you more government. Because more government busybodies like them are what you’re voting for.

MATTHEW HOY IS A FORMER REPORTER, EDITOR AND PAGE DESIGNER WHO HAS WORKED FOR THE LOMPOC RECORD, THE DAILY WORLD (ABERDEEN, WASH.), THE NORTH COUNTY TIMES AND THE SAN DIEGO UNION-TRIBUNE. YOU CAN READ HIS BLOG AT [HOYSTORY.COM](#) OR FOLLOW HIM ON TWITTER @[HOYSTORY](#).

EDITOR’S NOTE

Today, The Tribune introduces a new local columnist to replace John Peschong, who discontinued his column in late 2015 when he announced his candidacy for county supervisor. Like Peschong, Matthew Hoy will write every other week on a variety of topics, in rotation with liberal columnist Tom Fuls.

Hoy, a registered Republican, is a San Diego-area native and 1994 graduate of Cal Poly’s journalism program (after a brief detour into electrical engineering — making him one of the few journalists to have passed multivariable calculus, he says, final grade: “C-”).

He spent 15 years at various newspapers along the West Coast, including The Lompoc Record, The Daily World in Aberdeen, Wash., The North County Times in Escondido and The San Diego Union-Tribune. Since leaving the Union-Tribune, he has worked as a project manager, designer and software trainer for a San Luis Obispo textbook company specializing in mathematics.

For 15 years, Hoy has written a blog on politics and the media, [Hoystory.com](#), which has been referenced in several major publications. Some of his media criticism was featured in the book “Watching the Watchdog: Bloggers as the Fifth Estate,” by [Stephen D. Cooper](#).

Hoy lives in Atascadero with his wife, Janice. When he’s not writing, he can often be found at Cal Poly football, men’s soccer, basketball and lacrosse games.

Among his aspirations, he hopes to be called a “worthless failure” by Donald Trump on Twitter soon.

Reach Hoy at [hoystory@gmail.com](#); please join us in welcoming him to The Tribune’s Opinion pages.

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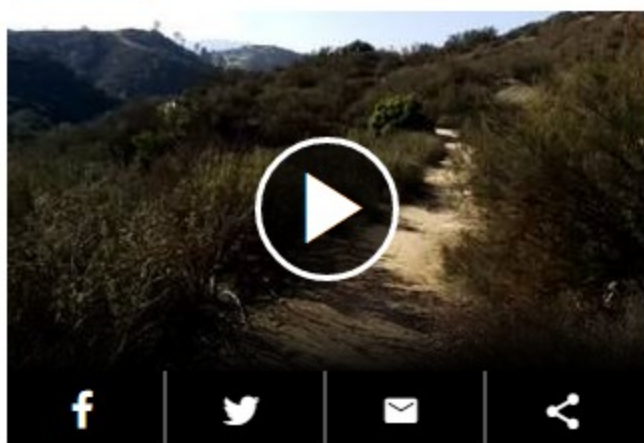
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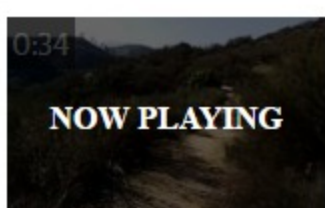
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ABOUT MATTHEW HOY



Matthew Hoy, a conservative, is a San Diego-area native and 1994 graduate of Cal Poly’s journalism program. He spent 15 years at various newspapers along the West Coast, including The Lompoc Record, The Daily World in Aberdeen, Wash., The North County Times in Escondido and The San Diego Union-Tribune. For 15 years, Hoy has written a blog on politics and the media, [Hoystory.com](#). Hoy’s column will be published in The Tribune every other week, in rotation with liberal columnist Tom Fuls.

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