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## Slipping through the cracks: Lafayette renters struggle to stay afloat

By Sharon K. Sobotta



Rental for \$6K on Brook Street Photo Sharon K. Sobotta

That's not the case."

Sunita Shastri, a single mom of two and a preschool teacher at The Child Day School in Moraga, found a one bed unit for \$1,900. Shastri earns a little less than \$2,500 a month. She utilizes her government issued EBT card to cover the cost of essential groceries and she is able to get a discount on PG&E and internet in her home.

How would she make ends meet and pay rent without these things? "I wouldn't," Shastri said.

Shastri and her family are in the queue for affordable rentals in Lafayette. Before finding her current place for \$1900/month, she was preparing for the possibility of being homeless.

Anna Connolly is a single mother of four, who is a licensed realtor and works as a server in a downtown restaurant to help cover her \$3,800 of monthly rent. Even though she works hard, Connolly said she still comes up a little short sometimes and has to lean on family. "I feel embarrassed and ashamed to be at this point in my life and still need to ask for help."

Prior to her divorce, Connolly was a homeowner and a stay-at-home mom. "A lot of people that I've known from in town have questioned if I still live in Lafayette now that they see me working as a server," Connolly says. "The truth is that if this can happen to me (as a person who's been here since I was 9), it can happen to anyone."

As a longtime resident of Lafayette who's been residing here for just under four decades, Janet Thomas says she's deeply invested in there being more affordable housing in town.

Thomas says she's been concerned about housing in the community for as long as she's lived here. Thomas recalls purchasing a modest two-bedroom house when she moved here 38 years ago and remodeling it with her husband during the summers to make room for her growing family, but she was aware that this wasn't necessarily an option for everyone she worked with.

"As (former) teachers in the Acalanes District, we were aware that most of our colleagues couldn't afford to live in this community and had to commute long distances to teach," Thomas said.

Now Thomas lives in an ADU home on a lot that she shares with her son and his wife, who would not otherwise have been able to live in Lafayette. "In replacing a free standing garage with an ADU, we've transitioned to an (intergenerational) situation that works well for us. We babysit, share a garden and patio and feel connected to our grandkids' schools. The cost was about one-fifth of a new home on a separate lot which is energy efficient and comfortable."

Hamza Houcher has held jobs delivering pizzas for Round Table, assisting at the Chevron station and working at the Lafayette Post Office. Now, Houcher has put down temporary roots in a one-bedroom rental unit that he shares with his wife and baby for \$1,600. If Houcher had it his way, he'd stay in Lafayette forever - if only he could afford it.

"We had our baby over a year ago and I've been trying to find a bigger place with my income," Houcher said. "I looked everywhere for low-income places in Lafayette, but there's nothing (available)." As multiple high density housing developments are coming up around the city, Houcher put his name in the myhousekeys.com hat to try his hand at accessing one of the few below market rate purchase options in town, but so far he's coming up short.

"Most of the units are full market rate and then there are several moderate level options and one low-income option and I'm number 59 on that list," Houcher said. "It seems like the people in charge assume that everyone in Lafayette earns \$100,000."

Thomas acknowledges that while ADUs may be a solution for those with intergenerational roots in Lafayette, they don't do much to accommodate service workers trying to live in the community and parents who may be struggling to keep their kids in the district. "Unless there's a strong incentive for community members to build ADUs and offer them to those outside of the family at affordable prices or unless there's a big shift in our general culture, I doubt this could be used as a solution for affordable housing in Lamorinda."

So what is the solution? Thomas says it's multifaceted. "There's not one solution. Rent control that limits but doesn't freeze rent is one action the city should consider," she said.

City Council Member Susan Candell agrees that rent control might be a matter worth revisiting at the city level. "The council discussed this in 2015 and 2017 with no action. It takes strong political will to pass good rent control measures and our current council may have the will to do this," Candell said. "It will be this balance of pros versus cons that will drive our decision."

Watching her sister navigate Lafayette as a renter gave Candell an appreciation for the kinds of struggles renters face. There was an instance when her sister's rent went up by 25% causing her sister and a third of the renters in the complex to need to move to smaller, less expensive places.

"We looked at many different places in town and some that refused to rent to her because of her three boys. This is illegal but hard to enforce," Candell says. "I imagine this is a familiar story for many, and it's important for the city to better understand what is actually happening in order to figure out if there are good solutions we can implement to improve renter's experiences."

A discussion about renters' issues will be held at 7 p.m. Nov. 17 at the Lafayette Library and Learning Center.

Reach the reporter at: [info@lamorindaweekly.com](mailto:info@lamorindaweekly.com)

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