



Rent Stabilization Board
Office of the Executive Director

May 21, 2020

Dear Chair LaVerde and Honorable Members of the Board:

On June 2, 2020, after more than 36 years serving Berkeley residents, I will retire from my position as Executive Director of the Rent Stabilization Program. It has been an awesome and incredibly fulfilling job.

We live in a diverse community of people, beliefs and customs. I have been proud to serve this community and proud to be a part of it. Berkeley has been my home and the focus of my work for nearly four decades. Here in Berkeley, we have a commitment to share community with those that are different from us, that may hold different beliefs or ideals, that may have more, or less, than we do. I firmly believe that diversity makes us stronger. I know that Berkeley will continue to strive to find and create balance in a society of an increasingly inequitable distribution of wealth and power.

The lead professor in my MPA program always advised, “Never stay in the same job for more than 7 years, because you just can’t remain fresh.” That I was able to keep a genuine passion for continuously improving the services to Berkeley residents for more than double that time speaks more about the nature of the work and the individuals I was blessed to work with than it does about me. The opportunity to serve has been a gift.

Recently, I have been disappointed regarding policy-related decisions and practices, procedures implemented, and actions taken by the Board. Given this divide, I believe it is time for me to move on to new endeavors. To the extent that my staff feel they have not been heard related to those issues or any other issues during my tenure as Executive Director, I do regret that. It is my only regret.

Global events of the past several months provide a stark reminder that life is short and there are many ways that one can make a difference. Last June, I notified the Board that it was not my intent to complete the entirety of my contract. Homelessness is on the rise and there is a deep need for services. For the past several years I have been preparing and serving meals for the homeless. This service has brought me joy, as well as the clarity that I want and need to do more there and with other vulnerable groups. So, I leave to start another journey and am grateful to have been given the opportunity to serve Berkeley as I have.

I am proud of the many people I have collaborated with and mentored over the years at the Rent Board, Public Works, and Parks Waterfront and Recreation Departments – their progress and continued good work is my greatest satisfaction. I have cherished the bonds built and good deeds done with my Union sisters and brothers as well as my many friends in City Management. There are hundreds of dear friends and colleagues that I must thank, and will do so privately.

However, I would feel a loss of personal integrity if I failed to publicly acknowledge the mentorship and trust bestowed upon me by two brilliant, undervalued and often forgotten African American women – Jackie Foster and Joyce Spikes. Together, they convinced me that one didn't have to go off to developing nations to live a life of service and meaning and, because Berkeley was such a special place, those riches were available in my own back yard. I am convinced that if it were not for their tireless and compassionate leadership almost forty years ago, Berkeley would not have a Rent Stabilization Program today. Their unheralded efforts establishing and guiding the Program have reduced stress and created greater stability for thousands of residents each day since they left their service with the City of Berkeley – May you both rest in peace.

When I joined the Program as an intern in February 1984, I was assigned two main projects: The first, to facilitate the Transition Taskforce, which developed the mechanisms by which the Program would operate and interact with the City once the Board converted from an appointed to an elected body. The second assignment was to develop and oversee the Program's strategy for defeating the recently introduced Costa Bill, which we were successful in defeating for ten years prior to my transferring to the City in 1994. The countless responsibilities and challenges since those initial assignments have been equally meaningful and rewarding, up to and including our amazing efforts to immediately respond to the uncertainty and threats posed by the COVID-19 crisis.

I also take great pride in my service to both the Parks and Recreation and Waterfront Commissions and being the first administrative staff appointed when we created a Parks and Waterfront Department. I advocated for a secure source of funding for the new department and took an extended leave to work on the campaign to adopt the Parks Tax. I was given the opportunity to be part of the negotiating team(s) that fought for greater gender pay equity, and won victories for the first Family Leave program, recognition of Domestic Partnerships and approval of employee sabbaticals. While all these efforts reflect endeavors to build the compassionate community we all desire, my personal favorite victory remains the development of a Catastrophic Leave policy that allows employees to donate their time to their fellow workers stricken by a catastrophic illness.

When I left the Parks Department to return to the Rent Board in 2002, my co-workers presented me with a calligraphy version of the Oath of the Athenian State, which I placed in the Rent Board's lobby over the past 18 years, to show staff and the public the underlying motivational values and commitment of our Program.

*"WE WILL EVER STRIVE FOR THE IDEALS AND SACRED THINGS OF THE CITY.
BOTH ALONE AND WITH MANY: WE WILL UNCEASINGLY SEEK TO QUICKEN THE SENSE OF PUBLIC DUTY.
WE WILL REVERE AND OBEY THE CITY'S LAWS: WE WILL TRANSMIT THIS CITY NOT ONLY NOT LESS,
BUT GREATER, BETTER, AND MORE BEAUTIFUL THAN IT WAS TRANSMITTED TO US."
Oath of the Athenian State*

I hope that even after I leave, the Board and the Program continues to use the spirit of these principles to guide their actions.

Those who spend time in my office know there are two works of art on the walls that have inspired me over the years. The first is a section of Ambrogio Lorenzetti's fresco - *The Allegory of Good and Bad Government on the City Life*. The second is a drawing of Sisyphus pushing a boulder up the hill, with a quote from Albert Camus saying, "one must imagine Sisyphus happy." I have always viewed this Greek myth as a metaphor for those who fight for a more just and equitable world, and Camus' quote as guidance in that endeavor. The struggle is never-ending; value and happiness must usually be found in the struggle rather than the measurable results of any moment.

The duties of Directorship are immense and I hope that with new leadership at the helm that Berkeley will continue to be a shining beacon for fair, balanced and equitable housing policy that other municipalities look to as a roll model for innovation and best practices.

I have been honored by the opportunity to promote value-based, good-government in Berkeley over these many years. As I retire from that service, I happily look forward to the many new ways I will be able to serve our wonderful and inspirational community.

Best wishes.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "J. Kelekian". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "J" and a stylized "K".

Jay Kelekian