

Santa Monica Democratic Club

2026 Rent Control Board Candidate Questionnaire

General Information

Candidate Name: Sue Himmelrich

Email Address: sue.himmelrich@gmail.com

Candidate's Current Occupation: Attorney

Candidate's Employer: Western Center on Law & Poverty

Campaign Contact Person (if other than candidate):

What qualifications do you bring to this office?

- I am a graduate of Harvard College and Columbia Law School. As a practicing attorney for more than 40 years, I am accustomed to reading, writing, editing and interpreting the law, including statutes and regulations such as the Rent Control Charter, Santa Monica Municipal Code, and state and federal law that governs this board. I also have served as a mediator of legal disputes and as a temporary judge, roles also relevant to service on this board.
- I am a seasoned veteran of Santa Monica government and politics, having served on the Planning Commission for 18 months and the City Council for 8 years.
- I have a proven track record of fighting against tenant displacement and for renter's rights. I have litigated cases on behalf of tenants threatened with displacement as part of my work at Western Center on Law & Poverty. I was a proponent (and funder) of 2 successful Santa Monica ballot measures, Measure GS-GSH in 2016 and Measure GS in 2022, that sought to prevent tenant displacement and homelessness, and to address rent burden. These two measures have generated to date at least \$60 million in funding for tenant-related services and affordable housing creation in Santa Monica (as well as an additional at least \$60 million in funding for our public schools).

2. Why are you running?

The Rent Control Board is the guardian of tenants' rights in Santa Monica granted by the City Charter to the more than 27,000 households living in rent-controlled units. I am disturbed by recent attacks on the very existence of rent control from not only landlords and developers, but also from allegedly pro-housing political actors who value quantity of housing over the safety and security of tenants who make their homes in our apartment stock. I am running to help assure that the board remains comprised of the most qualified and most committed rent-control and tenants' rights advocates.

3. What are the top issues of your campaign, and how do they differ from other candidates in this race? How do you plan to address those issues once elected?

The top issue of my campaign is assuring that the board remains comprised of the most qualified and most committed rent-control and tenants' rights advocates. I believe my skill set and track record sets me apart from any other candidate.

Once elected, I will apply my skills to faithfully carry out the duties of a board member as set forth in the City Charter. Where I have discretion, I will use it to protect our neighbors living in rent-controlled units from displacement and abuse of their rights to the maximum extent possible, as well as to protect our rent-controlled housing stock (which is the City's principal middle-class housing stock). I will also use my bully pulpit to advocate for the City Council and the State to do the same.

4. Please list all endorsements received to date (individual and organizational).

I have not yet sought endorsements.

5. How long have you lived in Santa Monica? Where else have you lived?

34 years. I grew up on the east coast and moved to Los Angeles to practice law.

6. Will you pledge to serve on the Rent Control Board for your entire four year term?

Yes.

7. What is your history of watching, attending, or speaking at Santa Monica Rent Control Board meetings? (If incumbent, prior to your own service.)

I watch occasional rent control board meetings and regularly check in with members of the Rent Control Board and review their agendas.

Campaign Finance

1. How much money have you raised for your campaign to date?

I have not yet opened a campaign committee, but I intend to self-fund my campaign as I did when successfully running for City Council in 2014 and 2018 (although I will not refuse donations, subject to question 3 below).

2. How much do you intend to raise by Election Day 2026?

It is too early to tell what amount will be necessary to run my campaign for this office.

3. Candidates for local office often choose not to take campaign contributions from particular types of organizations or industries who are out of step with their own values. Are there any such sources from which you would decline donations? If so, which?

As in my previous campaigns, I will not take contributions from corporations or real estate developers/landlords (including my brothers who develop real estate in Maryland and Florida and are commercial landlords).

Party / Activism

1. How long have you been a registered Democrat? Have you ever been registered as a member of another political party, or as Decline To State? If so, which party and why?

I have been a registered Democrat for 55 years since 1971 when I turned 18. I worked for my first Democratic campaign in 1970.

2. What is your experience with political activism? Have you ever volunteered or worked for a political campaign other than your own, and if so, in what capacity were you involved?

My first political campaign working for a Democratic candidate was in 1970, when I canvassed and campaigned as a volunteer for Joe Tydings' losing campaign in Maryland for United States Senate on a gun control platform. I have always been a registered Democrat and have worked on and donated to many campaigns. During the last 25 years, I have travelled across the country doing voter protection for John Kerry, Harry Reid, Barack Obama, and others. Together with the Santa Monica Democratic Club, I hosted a weekly phone bank at our home to flip the house, beginning before the primaries, in 2018. I was elected to the Executive Board of the California Democratic Party in January 2017 and prior to that time I was a delegate to the State party central committee. I remain an alternate member to LACDP and a State party delegate. I have never missed a meeting in any of these roles.

My early support for progressive candidates such as Barack Obama, Nanette Barragan, Ben Allen, Ted Lieu, and Tony Vazquez, and platform issues such as bail reform and repeal of Costa Hawkins (and I hope the Ellis Act), illustrates my commitment to the progressive wing of the Democratic party.

On the Santa Monica City Council, I introduced new ideas and programs, including creation of an audit subcommittee, registration of lobbyists, public posting of correspondence to the Council on agenda items, amendment of the Oaks Initiative to make it enforceable, protections for Section 8 tenants, teachers, students, and displaced tenants, and more.

My job as Special Counsel at Western Center on law and Poverty allows me stay abreast of most of the social justice and equity issues addressed by the California Democratic Party and by this club. As a general litigator, my cases address policies and practices relating to housing, Medi-Cal, and other state and federal entitlement programs that impact large numbers of Californians living below the poverty line.

3. Which political candidates and/or ballot measures have you endorsed or supported publicly in the past? Please list as many as possible, *especially where you endorsed during a contested primary.*

I have endorsed many candidates (and have held events at my home to launch some of their local campaigns), including our current Mayor, Caroline Torosis, council members Raskin, Snell, Zernitskya, and Hall, all of our current rent control board members, Mayor Karen Bass, and countless more who have pledged support for my safety-net issues.

Candidates I have endorsed or publicly supported in contested primaries include Barack Obama, Nanette Barragan, Ben Allen, Ted Lieu, and Tony Vazquez

I was a proponent of 2016 Measure GS-GSH and 2022 citizens' initiative Measure GS, and a funder of successful campaigns for each of these Measures. In 2022 I voted to place Measure RC on the ballot as a member of the City Council, and advocated for its passage. Measure RC was adopted by the voters and lowered the cap on annual rent increases for rent-controlled units from 6% to 3% (as well as assured that the cap effectively applied to the 2021-2022 rent-control year). In 2018 I was the sole member of the City Council who supported citizens' initiative Measure TL, which the voters passed overwhelmingly and imposed term limits on the Council. In 2014 I supported the passage of Measure LC and the defeat of Measure D (and included that message on my literature in support of my candidacy for City Council), both of which occurred.

4. Have you ever signed for or publicly supported efforts to recall a public official from office? If so, please list the name(s) of the officials and why you felt they should be recalled.

No.

5. Please list any organizations with which you are a member, including any leadership position you have held in each organization.

I am a member of the Santa Monica Democratic Club, Santa Monicans for Renters Rights, Stonewall Democratic Club, West LA Democratic Club (board member for 2 years), LACDP (alternate), California Democratic Party - CADEM (Executive Board for 4 years), Beverly Hills-West Hollywood Democratic Club, and Sierra Club.

6. Please confirm that you have read the latest version of the California Democratic Party Platform, as found below. List any items in the CDP Platform with which you disagree. <https://cadem.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/02/CDP-Platform-2026-FINAL-Platform-Adopted-2.22.26.pdf>

Confirmed.

Tenant Protections & Rent Control

1. What do you see as the mission or purpose of the Rent Control Law in the Charter, both at its founding and in its present form?

The founders of Santa Monica's rent control were motivated by a flood of evictions in the 1970's seeking to replace existing apartments affordable to lower and moderate income renters with condominiums that would be unaffordable to existing residents. An alliance of young and elderly activists successfully campaigned together for the voters to put rent control into the City Charter in an effort to assure that Santa Monica remained an economically diverse community, and that existing residents not be displaced to make way for high income residents. This battle continues today, as developers and others still seek to replace the existing more affordable rent-controlled housing stock with unaffordable high-end short term rentals and new luxury market-rate housing.

The Rent Control Law has never applied to newly constructed housing, even at its inception. However, as originally enacted the Rent Control Law sought to preserve the existing affordability of the then-existing rental housing stock by controlling annual rent increases and keeping those rent levels in place even when new tenants moved in (so called vacancy control). As a result, the rents in almost all rent-controlled units were affordable to those in the bottom half of the income distribution.

However, with the implementation of the State's Costa Hawkins Rental Housing Act, landlords now have the right to reset rent to whatever the market will bear each time a rent-controlled unit is vacated and a new tenant household moves in. As a result, the initial rents charged to new tenants are no longer affordable to the bottom half of the income distribution.

Nevertheless, the Rent Control Law still fulfills very a very important purpose today; namely, that as a general matter, if you could afford to move into your rent-controlled home, the pace of rent increases will not force you out of your home absent significant negative changes in your economic circumstances. This stability is important to the peace of mind and wellbeing of all rent-controlled tenants, and is especially important for long term renters (including the more than 5700 rent-controlled households who moved in before Costa Hawkins was fully implemented in 2000), the elderly, and families with children for whom displacement from existing housing is particularly devastating.

Moreover, because it is older, our rent-controlled housing still rents at rates to new tenants at rates that—unlike the rents charged in newly constructed rental housing in the City—are affordable to middle-income households.

Further, by requiring good cause for eviction, and reductions in rent if a landlord reduces tenant services, the Rent Control Law provides essential rights to tenants.

2. What are the biggest challenges to keeping tenants in their homes in Santa Monica?

The single biggest challenge to keeping tenants in their homes in Santa Monica is affordability. This is a chronic problem for most of our City's lower income households. Indeed, according to the most recent HUD CHAS data, two out of ten renter households in Santa Monica are both lower income and paying more than half of their limited incomes for rent and utilities. And an additional one out of ten Santa Monica renter households are paying more than 30% and up to 50% of their limited incomes for rent and utilities. While rent control is essential to mitigating the rate at which this challenge worsens, I am pleased that the City already has deployed 2016 Measures GS-GSH money to provide ongoing income assistance to elderly rent-burdened renters, and is beginning to use 2022 GS money to provide flexible financial assistance to rent-burdened households facing the potential loss of their homes through eviction.

The second biggest challenge is tenants' lack of knowledge and/or ability to assert their legal rights. While the RCB and its staff play an essential educational role, I am pleased that the City is now expanding its funding to the Legal Aid Foundation to provide attorneys to assist both low income and now moderate income renters assert their rights when threatened with losing their homes.

The third biggest challenge is the threat of redevelopment of rent-controlled housing. The City has historically sought to mitigate this threat by channeling development to unoccupied, commercial, or industrial land along the commercial boulevards and in the downtown through more permissive zoning in those areas. In addition, I am pleased that the City is working to create deed-restricted affordable housing for those who are displaced on the public land I fought to have included in the current housing element for this purpose, and using funds generated from 2016 Measure GS-GSH and 2022 Measure GS.

3. In light of the Justice for Renters Act failing to pass, and similar recent efforts to reform state housing laws falling short, how should the Rent Control Board operate effectively within the constraints of laws such as Costa-Hawkins and the Ellis Act? Should further attempts to repeal/reform these laws be pursued?

The RCB is obligated to follow all applicable laws, including Costa Hawkins and the Ellis Act. However, the RCB can and should make sure that the conditions set forth in those State laws are actually present when a removal permit application or other matter implicating one or another of these laws comes before it. The recent situation at

Barrington Piazza illustrates the importance of doing so.

While I support changes to Costa Hawkins and/or the Ellis Act, I believe at present a more practical approach is to try to get the State to provide money for ongoing and emergency income assistance for rent burdened renters, for a right to counsel for renters facing a threat to their homes, and for exemptions to State mandated upzoning for rent-controlled housing stock. Efforts should also be made to press the State to provide public land (e.g., the DMV site) and more funding for the creation of deed-restricted affordable / social housing so individuals who are displaced can find replacement housing within Santa Monica.

4. What types of legislation or other factors do you believe may threaten the stability of Rent Control housing in Santa Monica?

Reckless legislation such as the original versions of SB 79 and AB 1740 threaten rent control housing and the purposes behind rent control in Santa Monica and beyond because, in their rush to expedite new market rate housing willy-nilly, lawmakers ignore the situation on the ground. Particularly in highly desirable and resourced communities like Santa Monica, the rush to create more market rate housing has overlooked less wealthy residents who make their homes in housing made affordable because of long term tenancies in older housing stock that would become more attractive for redevelopment under these laws (as well as the middle-class tenants who will take over that older housing when the current tenants move out).

5. Which communities in Santa Monica are most at risk of housing instability or displacement, and how would you use your position on the Rent Control Board to address these challenges?

The community most at risk of eviction and/or displacement in Santa Monica are the many lower income individuals who spend more than 50% (or even more than 30% up to 50%) of their income for rent. This includes not just the elderly and persons with disabilities on fixed incomes but also many working Santa Monicans whose incomes have not kept pace with the cost of living here. This includes certain teachers, retail and hospitality workers, and medical workers.

The ability of the RCB to address these issues as a formal matter is limited. I certainly would continue to implement the various fee and pass through waivers for lower income tenants, impose dollar caps on pass throughs and rent increases as authorized, assure that the conditions for mandatory removal of rent-controlled units are met, and exercise discretion where appropriate to preserve rent-controlled housing when removal is not mandatory. I also would continue my long history of advocacy in the City, the State, and the Democratic Party for laws and resources to protect rent-controlled tenants AND non-rent-controlled tenants (e.g., by urging a lower cap on increases for at least 15 year old non-rent controlled housing that is covered by the State Tenant Protection Act's rent-control provisions).

6. How do you think Santa Monica should address situations where tenants face eviction over small rental debt.

I agree as a matter of policy with the LA county rule just enacted that raises the threshold for eviction to two months of HUD fair market rent. Smaller amounts can be collected by landlords through emergency rental assistance programs and/or small claims court without displacing tenants from their homes.

7. Do you believe tenants in rent controlled units should have the right to add additional family members to their household without facing eviction? Why or why not?

I believe that tenants should be allowed to add family members to their household without facing eviction. Life often makes it appropriate to take a family member into one's home, and renters should have the ability as well as homeowners, subject to reasonable limitations.

8. Did you support SB 79 before it included any protections for existing rent-controlled housing and its tenants? Why or why not? Do you believe the anti-displacement provisions of SB 79 as adopted go far enough? Why or why not? Do you believe Santa Monica ought to implement greater protections for existing rent-controlled units and their tenants than SB 79 provides? Why or why not?

I did not support SB 79 before it included any protections for rent-controlled housing and was proud of our current rent board for opposing it unless amended to protect all rent-controlled housing. My position on tenant displacement is inflexible – tenants should never be displaced from their homes unless absolutely necessary for public safety reasons. There is sufficient room for new market-rate development along the boulevards and in downtown, as our housing plans always contemplated.

Policy Implementation

9. The Rent Control Board often serves a quasi-judicial role in hearing petitions and interpreting regulations. How would you approach making fair, consistent decisions in cases where tenants and landlords present competing claims?

I have experience acting as a neutral in quasi-judicial and judicial proceedings as a Planning Commissioner, City Council member and a Judge Pro Tem in the Los Angeles Superior Court for close to ten years. As an attorney, I am accustomed to following the rule of law in decision-making. I believe the integrity of this process is essential to maintaining faith in the RCB and the fabric of rent control.

10. Based on the first few years of implementation, how do you assess Measure GS? Are there any adjustments or clarifications you believe should be considered? If so, what and why?

We remain stuck at the bottom of the real estate cycle as Trump's tariffs, Trump's deportations, Trump's attacks on the independence of the Federal Reserve, and Trump's Iran war have kept interest rates at extremely high levels, and increased the costs of construction labor and material. Despite these headwinds,, over its first three years Measure GS has generated \$30 million for our public schools, and \$50 million for the Homelessness Prevention and Affordable Housing Fund. City Council is now beginning to deploy those latter funds, including \$6 million for flexible financial assistance to at risk renters, \$2.5 million for additional attorneys for lower and moderate income renters, and likely \$800,000 for a one year pilot program to identify and proactively assist the currently housed Santa Monicans most at risk of becoming homeless. The GS Commission is recommending that Council make another \$23.5 million available to support creation of new affordable housing. None of this—or the further expansion of income support programs to rent burdened households which City Council directed Staff to explore as part of the “affordability agenda”—would be possible without 2022 Measure GS.

I supported in principle (although not in every detail) the City Council's efforts to put market rate developers in a position to move forward with their develop their properties despite all of the current economic headwinds. I believe that an realistic opportunity for macro-economic conditions to improve and the new offsite program to kick in should pass before any possible changes to Measure GS are considered (and any changes adopted should be revenue neutral to the purposes supported by Measure GS).

Ballot Measures

1. Do you support the California Billionaire Tax Act, which would impose a one-time emergency 5% tax on those worth more than \$1B? Why or why not?

Wealth inequality is eroding the quality of life for the people of this nation. That is why I proposed and funded 2022 Measure GS and that is why I support a California Billionaire Tax.

2. Do you support the state ballot measure which would require voters to present government-issued identification when casting ballots? Why or why not?

I oppose this measure because it will suppress legitimate voter participation in our elections and impose unnecessary time delays on those voters who do participate.

3. Do you support the proposed state taxpayer initiative which would limit the ability of local governments to raise revenue through certain taxes and fees including real

estate transfer taxes? Why or why not?

I oppose this initiative because I believe that wealth inequality is eroding the quality of life for all but the wealthiest among us. Without these revenue-raising measures, cities will not be able to provide adequate services its residents, particularly its most disadvantaged residents. This is why I sponsored, provided funding, and spent countless hours in order to pass both 2016 Measure GS-GSH and 2022 Measure GS—both of which provide funding for our schools, for income support and homelessness prevention programs, and for the creation of new deed-restricted affordable housing.

4. Do you support the proposed parcel tax to fund SMMUSD? Why or why not?

Yes. For \$495 per year per parcel, this tax is a reasonable effort to guarantee that we at least maintain our current levels of public school funding, notwithstanding the City's current fiscal situation and the pending expiration of the Master Use Facilities Agreement. at minimal cost to property owners at a time when federal and state support for our schools is diminishing. The burden on rent-controlled tenants should be quite limited, both because the RCB limits the amount landlords may pass-through to tenants, and because the permissible pass-through is spread across all units on the property.

5. Do you support the proposed ballot measure which would set aside 25% of the airport land for 3000 units of affordable housing, in addition to the remainder which would become a Great Park? Why or why not?

I continue to support below market rate housing at the airport, though not in the precise form envisioned by the proponents of this measure. And I also support the creation of a Great Park. These two concepts are not mutually exclusive. Use of a small portion of the 191 acre site to create below-market rate housing is necessary because it avoids having to spend limited affordable housing money acquiring land (which costs some \$25 million per acre in our City) and is consistent with the longstanding Santa Monica value of an economically inclusive City (the very value that led to the passage of the Rent Control Law).

Additional Questions

1. Should the Rent Control Board have the authority to place measures directly on the ballot without City Council approval? Why or why not?

While I believe the Rent Control Board has a unique and significant role in City governance, I know after 8 years on the City Council that their purview is far narrower than the many dimensions of governance presented to the City Council. In my experience, the City Council has (with one exception) placed the RCB recommendations on the ballot on request. I believe this structure remains appropriate moving forward.

2. Should term limits for the Rent Control Board be changed? Why or why not?

I believe that we should conform the term limits for RCB to the term limits of our city council representatives, i.e., 3 terms as defined in the municipal code.

3. If elected, how would you attempt to interact with the Santa Monica Democratic Club and other political organizations to ensure community buy-in on new proposals?

As I have in the past, I will have an open door policy for public input. And as I have in the past, I will present any new proposals to existing community organizations in as public a forum as possible to obtain community agreement..

4. What is the most important topic that was left off of this questionnaire?

None comes to mind.

5. Please describe whether and how you used generative AI tools in preparing your responses. If elected, how would you use these tools in governance, if at all?

No I have not used AI for my response. If elected, I would use AI for data collection, subject to appropriate human verification.