marinij.com

Novato chooses affordable housing sites

By Rob Rogers
Marin Independent Journal

Posted: 07/15/2011 05:15:37 PM PDT

After more than a year of controversy and more than five hours of discussion and debate, the Novato City Council approved five potential sites for affordable housing late Thursday night.

No single site received the approval of all five councilwomen, with Mayor Madeline Kellner, Denise Athas and Jeanne MacLeamy voting in favor of all five sites and Pat Eklund able to support only one.

All five will now be listed as potential affordable housing sites in Novato's housing element, a section of the city's general plan. The city is required to update its housing element periodically by the state Department of Housing and Community Development and the Association of Bay Area Governments.

The newly approved sites included:

• Property at 1787 Grant Ave., approved 4-1, with Eklund dissenting.

• The Lifelong Medical site at 1905 Novato Blvd., approved 3-2, with Eklund and Carole Dillon-Knutson dissenting.

• An RV storage site on the north side of Landing Court, approved 4-1, with Eklund dissenting.

• The "Campus Properties" site on Redwood Boulevard at Black John Road, approved 4-1, with Dillon-Knutson dissenting.

• And a site to the north and east of the Trader Joe's property, approved 4-1, with Eklund dissenting.

The five sites, if developed, would provide an additional 202 units of affordable housing. City officials have insisted that the sites will only be developed if their owners want

to sell and if a developer expresses interest.

Not everyone was pleased about the council's choices.

"Why would you even consider a school — that's what 1787 Grant (Ave.) is," said Virginia Avenue resident Brigham Thompson at Thursday's meeting, referring to Bridgepoint Academy. "If you must, go after a field or a vacant lot — not a school. And do you know what 49 housing units at the top of my street would do to my neighborhood? There aren't 30 houses on all of Virginia Avenue!"

It's now up to the state to decide whether Novato's housing element will pass muster.



Print Powered By FormatDynamics™

ITEM NO. 6c PAGE 1

marinij.com

While providing the number of affordable housing units required by law, the City Council also voted Thursday to declare a maximum housing density of 20 units per acre. That's far lower than the 30 units per acre the state considers a "default density" for "metropolitan" cities like Novato.

In addition, the council plans to review many of its housing policies over the next few months.

"Those policies have to do with the design of a multifamily structure — how safe it should be, how it can accommodate those with disabilities and prevent crime," Mayor Kellner said Friday. "We heard at one of our meetings what successful apartment managers do: how they conduct background checks and screen residents, and if residents are not working out, move them on."

Kellner said the council had considered reviewing those policies on Thursday, but chose not to do so in light of the extremely late hour.

"We wanted to have those policies incorporated into the housing element," Kellner said. "But obviously, at 11 p.m., there was not a lot of time to work on that."

Contact Rob Rogers via email at rrogers@marinij.com



Print Powered By FormatDynamics

ITEM NO. 6c PAGE 2

marinij.com

Marin Voice: Housing quotas have failed

By Niccolo Caldararo
Guest op-ed column

Posted: 07/19/2011 02:54:00 AM PDT

RECENT Marin Voice columns urge more housing for Marin, either by referring to the Association of Bay Area Governments numbers or to social needs of the county.

The ultimate solution is always to build more housing.

I suggest we replace building more housing by the process of succession. Instead of new construction, we should rebuild homes as they are placed on the market as rentals, townhouses or condominiums.

By redesigning our housing ordinances in the county and our towns we can limit new construction but entice property owners to provide more units of housing by rehabbing existing single housing units as multiple units.

Too often, the housing debate is couched in either/or terms, as in those from Andrew Hyman, following on an April 3 report by Fair Housing of Marin.

Mr. Hyman reports on visiting an "affordable housing" site and he wishes there were more such units. We all do, however, since the first builder-friendly laws were passed in the 1960s to reduce local government control of housing, we have seen little built.

In the intervening , an avalanche of laws have been passed to make it easier to build low-cost housing, but they have failed.

Environmental laws have been gutted and most projects are now passed with negative declaration status. Also, the courts have so gutted the requirements, that now even water availability has been eliminated.

A Feb. 27 article in the

IJ reported on commuter data collected by Live Local Marin and purported to show that people in Marin and those who work in Marin, but live elsewhere, log the most miles of any county.

The conclusion of the report argues that Marin needs to build more affordable housing. The assumption is that if you building housing near work sites people will live there.

Despite this kind of social engineering, people will live where they want to, as irrational as that may seem to planners.

The main problem with the reports is that in the 50 years since specific laws were passed to increase low-cost and affordable housing, the Public Policy Institute of California has



Print Powered By FormatDynamics

ITEM NO. 6c PAGE 3

marinij.com

shown in a 2003 report that no appreciable low-cost or affordable housing has been built.

The result of a host of laws to force municipalities and counties to produce such housing has failed.

Some critics have argued that this is because these laws did not provide a funding source for land purchases, financing or building costs. Others have pointed out that the legislation lacks a clear mandate for and definition of what is affordable housing.

Reliance on local income formulas produce distorted categories. For example, what is a median income in Ross and thus what is an affordable home there? Most people who commute into Marin live in counties with significantly lower median incomes than Marin, so calculations based on county data for Marin are simply distorting.

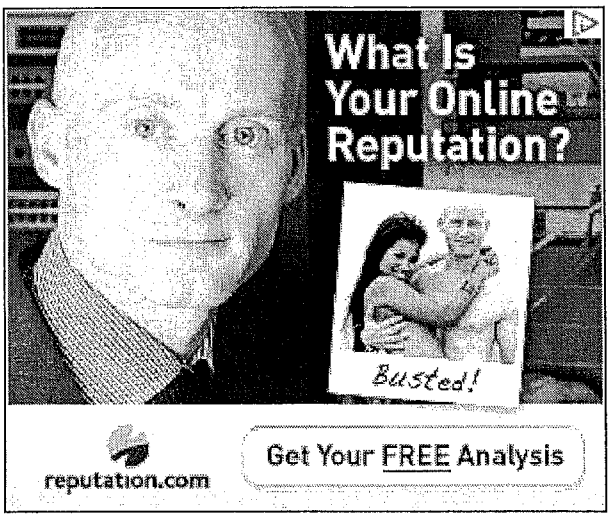
No appreciable affordable housing has been built because one can make a greater profit on market-rate housing. We live in a capitalist society, and profit is the main incentive.

So how can we provide for low-cost and affordable housing? We can do it by taxing the highest-profit homes. Since new construction usually is on virgin land or results in the destruction of smaller affordable housing, a tax on new construction could be used to finance affordable housing in that it is both increasing our carbon footprint and decreasing the inventory of affordable housing.

It would be hard to argue that those buying such market-rate housing in Marin today cannot pay such taxes. They can and they should to compensate for the environmental destruction these houses produce.

This money could be used to entice the production of multiple-unit housing instead of building single-family homes.

Niccolo Caldararo is a former Fairfax council member and an anthropologist.



Print Powered By FormatDynamics

ITEM NO. 6c PAGE 4

marinij.com

Brad Breithaupt: Fight for local control is being fought in wrong arena

By Brad Breithaupt
Marin Independent Journal

Posted: 07/20/2011 04:19:00 AM PDT

WHILE RIDING in Novato's 4th of July parade, Toni Shroyer, an outspoken critic of Novato's affordable-housing plans, led a cheer:

"We love Novato.

Novato is here to stay.

Local control is the way."

"The crowd loved it," says Shroyer, a leader of Citizens for Balanced Housing, which has rallied for greater "local control" while challenging state-mandated quotas for building low-cost housing in Novato.

It's easier to yell "local control" on Grant Avenue or at a Novato City Council meeting than it is to change Sacramento's top-down push for regional governance. In Sacramento, local control amounts to cities' ability to come up with their own local plan to comply with state mandates.

Without those quotas, there would be a lot less political pressure on city councils in affluent areas to build affordable housing. But state mandates erode local control.

But Novato leaders got a taste of the capital's point of view.

They saw Sacramento lawmakers gut Assemblyman Jared Huffman's attempt to let cities appeal their state housing quotas and lower the number of affordable residential units for which they have to make room. Huffman's bill originally would have allowed Novato to appeal its designation as "metropolitan" and change it to "suburban," which would lessen its requirement.

But that idea never made it past its first hearing.

Huffman said the change wouldn't exempt

counties and cities from their regional shares of affordable housing, but would have provided more flexibility in the quotas to reflect local planning realities.

"It has certainly taken a hair cut," said Huffman. "The good news is there is still some hair left."

Huffman's bill — AB 1103 — still offers some changes, such as increasing credit toward the local quota cities and counties get from acquiring housing and making it affordable.

But the bill falls short of Huffman's original intent to open the door wider to make a case



Print Powered By FormatDynamics

ITEM NO. 6c PAGE 5

marinij.com

to reduce their quotas.

The state Senate analysis reflects Sacramento's view and doesn't offer much empathy for Novato residents and politicians who are challenging the quotas.

The legislative staff report sums up Huffman's bill: "This bill arises out of a political controversy in the city of Novato in which residents opposed the city's efforts to comply with housing element law by identifying sites to rezone for higher-density multifamily housing."

Staff adds: "The city's lack of sites is a political problem, because from a planning and development perspective, there are viable sites within the city that can support such housing. ... Most communities, even suburban communities, have found it possible and reasonable to zone for densities of 30 units per acre."

Boiled down to three words, the state staff's message is: "Stop whining, Novato."

I READ a lot of governmental agendas and some are better than others when it comes to informing the public, not just staff and politicians, exactly what boards and councils are doing.

One item I ran across near the end of the Board of Supervisors' June 21 agenda was a short list of county contracts for a variety of health and social service programs. It reads: "Authorize President to approve extension of service provider agreements with various non-profits and individuals as detailed in staff report dated June 21, 2011."

That's bureaucrat-ese for 160 contracts, totalling more than $26 million.

Brad Breithaupt is the IJ's opinion page editor. His column appears on Wednesdays.

advertisement

Print Powered By FormatDynamics

ITEM NO. 6c PAGE 6