

Difficulty Meeting Lamorinda ABAG Housing Allocation

By Cathy Tyson



City and Town officials and resident listened to the theABAG presentation at Saint Mary's Soda Center

Photo Andy Scheck

Recently representatives from the Association of Bay Area Governments (ABAG) came to Saint Mary's College to participate in a forum to discuss their new system to address low income housing requirements with the mayors and selected city staff of Lafayette, Orinda and Moraga along with County Supervisor Gayle Uilkema. The Lamorinda meeting was just one of a number of sessions ABAG staff is setting up around the Bay Area's nine counties.

It's no secret that over time the region will continue to grow, ABAG's semi-annual Projections summarizes population, households, employment forecasts and the necessary housing units to support that growth. Since 2003 the modeling for Projections has changed from a trends-based approach to developing performance targets based on mathematical modeling. They anticipate two million more people in the region by 2035, and 700,000 new housing units to support this growth.

"From ABAG's perspective, it must be the worst of all worlds – they are told to create and enforce regulations but given no power to do so. In the process, ABAG makes enemies out of its member agencies that fund its staff and operations – and looks impotent while doing so," said a very reliable source.

Another dimension of the ABAG mission is AB 32, better known as the Global Warming Solutions Act. The landmark legislation passed in 2006, establishes a target for reducing global warming pollution to 1990 levels by 2020 in California. Most would agree this is not a bad thing. Translating this into vehicle miles traveled, building transit centers and constructing the required low income housing near BART is where it gets tricky.

"Adding one hundred additional low income units in San Francisco is entirely different than adding 100 units in Lafayette," said Niroop Srivatsa, Lafayette's Planning Director.

ABAG's Regional Housing Needs Allocation (RHNA) assigns each jurisdiction in the Bay Area their interpretation of its share of the region's total housing need. Lamorinda has the following allocations:

Lafayette 361, Moraga 234 and Orinda 218. This number represents the total number of new very low, low, moderate and above moderate housing. As diligent as our City Planners have been, Lamorinda cities are no where near those numbers.

What happens if you don't meet your RHNA numbers? The short answer is nothing, according to Emmanuel Ursu, Orinda Planning Director. "Last time I checked about one-third of the cities in California don't have a certified housing element." The downside of not meeting RHNA numbers is that, "it opens up the city to potential legal challenges by housing advocacy groups." Also the Measure C one-quarter cent sales tax revenue could be at risk. There's a checklist for Measure C funds that the city goes through every two years. If the city can demonstrate that they have zoning in place for low income housing, that's adequate to meet the requirement.

At the meeting Lafayette's Mayor Mike Anderson noted that this was an especially bad time to for a state agency to be forcing these numbers on cities. He opined, "The state government looks foolish, they can't balance their own budget, and yet you want us to just adopt the state's land use plans?"

"Why not approach it from an economic development perspective? There is a perception that the burden is uneven...it should be more equitable," said Orinda's mayor, Victoria Smith referring to the weighting of cities that taxed themselves to have a BART station. They, notably Orinda and Lafayette have higher RHNA allocations due to available transit.

There was a palpable sense of disconnect at the meeting, "you value transit, we value open space and the semi-rural nature of our communities" said Anderson. Therein lies the problem.