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City Housing Element Processing Continues

By Cathy Tyson

Although it hasn't been finalized, last week the City Council discussed a draft of the revised Housing Element. After a presentation by Planning and Building Manager Niroop Srivatsa, and hearing public comment; they gave it a green light and had it sent to State Department of Housing and Community Development for review. Once the review is complete, the Planning Commission and City Council will hold public hearings before final adoption.

"Every five to eight years, the State Department of Housing and Community Development (HCD) requires that cities and counties outline the housing needs in the community, the barriers or constraints to providing that housing, and actions proposed to address these concerns," said City Manager Steven Falk in a written statement. "The State HCD also allocates, through local Councils of Government, each locality's 'fair share housing needs' by income category that the jurisdiction is to consider in the development of its Housing Element."

Lafayette is obligated to provide the opportunity for a total of 361 units of very low income, low income and moderate income households to accommodate Regional Housing Needs Allocation (RHNA) established by the HCD. California already requires that new downtown developments have 15 percent of the units designated as affordable housing.

The City must "show the state that we have sufficient land available to foster the development of affordable housing," said Srivatsa in her presentation. She also noted that the city has no requirement to actually build homes or reserve space for housing and that the state just wants to make sure there are no hurdles or barriers in place.

What would be the repercussions if the housing element was not submitted? "Funds could be withheld by state and outside housing groups could sue," said Srivatsa. "There is an obligation as part of the Lafayette General Plan to have the Housing Element."

It's no surprise, even with currently slightly deflated housing prices, Lamorinda teachers, firemen and police find it very difficult to live in the area. "The need for affordable housing is so large - no matter how many units are built, it will never be enough," said Diana Elrod, a housing consultant.

While demonstrating the potential for lower income units is required by staff, there is a "not in my backyard" concern that some residents share. "The vast majority of homes in Lafayette are single family residences," said David Bruzzone. "There are better ways to provide affordable housing, like in-law units." Mayor Don Tatzin replied that city already recognizes in-law units as potential low income housing.

On a lighter note, regular City Council meeting attendee Guy Atwood said, "if the economy keeps going the way its going we may all be living in affordable housing."

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