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Published June 24th, 2009

Moraga's Housing Element Planning Commission raises important questions for future development in Moraga

By Sophie Braccini

On June 15 the Moraga Planning Commission reviewed a draft of the housing element that identifies future needs for the community. The Town Council is scheduled to discuss the draft, and the Commission's recommendations, at its June 24th meeting (see our website for updates, <http://www.lamorindaweekly.com>.)

Each jurisdiction in California is assigned, by the State, an objective in terms of number and type of housing that it wants to see developed. Towns that do not plan to meet that obligation could be at risk of losing their Measure C one-quarter cent sales tax revenue (about \$250,000 for Moraga, per year). Moraga's share consists of planning for 307 units between 2007 and 2014 (84 very low income, 64 low income, 97 moderate income and 62 above moderate income housing units.)

The consulting firm Baird and Driskell Community Planning was hired by the town to draft a plan that would meet those obligations. According to the document, two key elements characterize housing in Moraga: The town has one the lowest growth rates of housing development in the county, and the cost of housing in Moraga is significantly higher than the county's average. There are nearly 5,800 housing units in Moraga, and only 86 new units were built between 1999 and 2006.

The Specific Plan that the town has been working on for years should accommodate the state's housing needs requirement and beyond, once the municipal code is modified to allow a higher housing density than is presently permitted. However, the consultants highlighted some town specific impediments that could compromise the realization of the projects.

"Some of the Town's zoning and other planning requirements may reduce the feasibility of affordable multifamily housing development," wrote the consultants in their report. Some of the specifics are that the zoning regulations that allow multifamily housing need the approval of a conditional use permit, and that the design review process may delay and/or result in expensive modifications to housing projects. Most of the Planning Commissioners agreed that streamlining the planning process should be studied.

The rules that govern the approval of secondary units in Moraga were criticized as well. This type of unit could be considered moderate or even low income housing, and it could help the town meet its obligations if more were built.

Former Planning Commissioner Alan Sayles took the stand as part of the public comment process, "This ordinance (regulating the building of secondary units) is a complete failure," said Sayles, it could be fixed, just make it a design review requirement."

Sayles added that there are probably secondary units built before the incorporation of the town and an opportunity should be given to legalize their construction. Planning Chair Margaret Goglia proposed an amnesty for those units, a period of time during which people who may have constructed such units without approval could get them registered. The Commission unanimously agreed that changing the rules for secondary units was a necessity.

In its desire to see things materialize in town, the Planning Commission also said that if "green standards" were recommended for construction, the plan should only advocate affordable options. In an additional effort to refrain from imposing too many constraints on developers, the Commission also suggested that senior housing include only the minimum requirements for Universal design (a standard that strives to create housing environments that are usable and effective for everyone, including the elderly and people with disabilities).

Once the Town Council approves the draft, it will be sent to the State for review before coming back to the town for final consideration.

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