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No Drama for Housing Element

By Cathy Tyson

With very little hoopla and a couple of supportive public comments, the Lafayette Planning Commission recommended that the City Council send the current administrative draft of the Housing Element to the state for its review. After an extensive public outreach effort last spring, with community workshops hosted by mayor Don Tatzin, not a single person at the commission's Sept. 15 meeting came forward with a complaint or negative comment.

State law requires that cities examine the housing needs in their community, and come up with an eight-year plan to address what the state considers a way to accommodate the jurisdiction's fair share of housing needs.

The next cycle runs from 2014 to 2022. Lafayette has until Jan. 31 to submit an adopted Housing Element; by submitting the administrative draft early in the process, careful to point out this will be a streamlined review, meeting that deadline shouldn't be a problem. The state's Department of Housing and Community Development has 60 days to review the draft, which then comes back to the city for further discussion, if needed, and adoption.

Consultant Diana Elrod pointed out the many benefits of providing the state with a streamlined review of the draft housing element, which highlights those sections that have materially changed since the last adopted Housing Element in 2011. She received positive feedback for her extensive work thus far; commissioner Will Lovitt called it "focused, meticulous and careful - I'm always impressed."

Key elements of the Housing Element include an inventory of adequate sites and assessments of goals, policies and programs. The proposed document includes some new programs: offering incentives to encourage rehabilitation of deteriorating multi-family housing, conversion of illegally converted residential units, and green building incentives.

As Lafayette becomes more and more built out, it's a significant challenge to ensure that there's an inventory of adequate sites that have the correct zoning to allow for housing at all economic levels to be built.

The Association of Bay Area Governments looks at existing need and projected need for housing; the total projected need is 400 housing units for the cycle that starts in 2014. Those units are divided into categories that include very low income, low income, moderate income and above moderate income - with an average yearly need of 57 housing units.

City staff compiled a list of vacant and underutilized parcels downtown to determine what land was available for development. The state does not require cities to actually build the housing necessary to meet the community's need, however it does require that each community adopt policies and programs to support housing development.

Two women had comments for the planning commissioners. Mary Fenelon is involved with a number of organizations and faith groups that focus on affordable housing. She cited the desperate need for housing and the growing homeless population in Contra Costa County, where 40 percent of the homeless are children.

Gwen Watson, who chairs the Social Justice Alliance of the Interfaith Council of Contra Costa County, stated, "Housing is one of our most important issues." She noted that there are currently 100 people on the waiting list for the Winter Nights rotating shelter.

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