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Town council and planning commission hold joint discussion regarding affordable housing

By Vera Kochan



An example of a multi-family unit Photo provided

Moraga is in the process of gearing up for its Comprehensive Advanced Planning Initiative: 6th Cycle Housing Element and Rezone and General Plan Update. California requires all cities to update its Housing Element every eight years (this cycle will cover 2023-2031), and it must be adopted by Jan. 31, 2023.

The planning department has already held several informative meetings with the town council and the planning commission, in addition to conducting three community workshops for Moraga's residents. The latest joint council/commission discussion took place on Nov. 17. Also in attendance were Barry Miller, an urban planning consultant, Director of Real Estate Development Susie Criscimagna with Eden Housing, Policy Director Jeffrey Levin with East Bay Housing Organizations, and Managing Principal Matt Kowta with BAE Urban Economics.

According to a staff report by Planning Director Afshan Hamid and Miller, "One objective of the Housing Element is to support the production of a variety of housing types for a diverse range of income groups. The Town is required to plan for its 'fair share' of the region's housing needs over the eight-year planning period. The assignment is made by the Association of Bay Area Governments (ABAG) through a process called the Regional Housing Needs Allocation (RHNA)." For the 2023-31 period, Moraga must identify 1,118 housing units, 501 of which must be for low and very low-income households, located on sites that are zoned at densities of 20 units per acre or more. Since Moraga is not typically known for affordable housing, it must develop policies and programs to support private and nonprofit sectors with housing construction.

There are a number of zoning tools that can come into play with regards to affordable housing. One of the primary tools is to zone land for multi-family use such as apartment buildings. With constructions of three stories or higher, densities of 30 units per acre can quickly help to meet the RHNA standards.

Another zoning tool would make allowances for multi-family dwellings in commercial districts. Minimum density requirements would prohibit single-family homes from being built on land zoned for multi-family units or require any housing built on former commercial areas to be at least 20 units per acre.

Yet another zoning tool would be to take advantage of state density bonuses. These allow developers to build additional units if they create some affordable units within the projects. Bonuses are also available for senior housing, college student housing, disabled veterans housing, foster parent housing and housing for formerly homeless residents.

California density bonus laws already limit the number of parking spaces that a municipality may require for affordable housing units. The Moraga Municipal Code currently requires two parking spaces for each dwelling unit regardless of the type. Additionally, for every two dwelling units, one guest parking space is required. The staff report states, "The Town could consider reducing parking requirements for projects meeting specific criteria, such as affordability, proximity to bus or shuttle service, availability of off-site parking nearby, or availability of e-bikes, shared cars, or other modes of travel that reduce car ownership."

Other tools the town might consider is to offer reduced permit, planning or impact fees; and streamline the lengthy permit approval processing. It could also offer Inclusionary Housing and Housing Trust Funds, whereby a policy would require a specified share of new market-rate housing developments to be affordable to low- or moderate-income households. If developers opt to pay an "in lieu fee" rather than building the units on-site, then the fee is deposited into a Housing Trust Fund which accrues fees from other projects. When the funds increase, the proceeds may be used to help nonprofit developers build 100% affordable housing or other forms of housing assistance.

Accessory Dwelling Units (sometimes called "in-law" units) are another means of adding to the town's affordable housing requirements. Additionally, large companies or institutions can build housing for their employees; or in a Saint Mary's College example, housing for their faculty, staff and students.

While the Nov. 17 Special Meeting was merely for informational purposes with no direct fiscal impact, the various tools presented and discussed would conceptually have a variety of financial effects on the town.

For more information regarding the Moraga 2023-31 Housing Element Project visit: makemoragahome.org.

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