



M A R I N C O U N T Y
SUPERVISOR
KATE SEARS

Housing Element Hearing, September 24, 2013

The diversity of speakers and variety of perspectives underlines how important it is to nurture the ability to disagree respectfully, to not resort to threats as part of our discourse, to not try to get what we want by inciting fear and distrust, and to leave room for the possibility that each of use at some point may be mistaken. As Richard Howell, the musician who so beautifully started our September 17 meeting, says on his webpage: “We are all connected, so we must treat each other right.”

We also need to think beyond ourselves and our immediate neighborhood. Making decisions on public issues requires that we all consider what benefits the broader community and a time frame beyond the immediate. We sometimes view “community” too narrowly, constricting our policy choices to the detriment of the broader community. It is difficult to perceive the common good when the primary question we ask is, “What’s in it for me, today?”

It is good to be vigilant – we learned that from our legacy of environmental activism in Marin and reflect that lesson in our fierce determination to protect our local interests against any perceived intrusion by higher levels of government. But vigilance does not mean we say “no” to everything.

It is easy to distrust, to see a small change as the beginning of a torrent of negative consequences. But it’s particularly unfortunate when we extend that distrust to our county staff and our local elected officials. All of us try hard to do what is best for our county and our communities.

State Housing Element law requires the county, and every city as well, to plan for future housing needs at all income levels. While we may chafe at this requirement, thinking about the kinds of housing we need is a good idea. We need housing for older adults who wish to drive less as they age in their homes; for parents downsizing to smaller homes; for young adults wanting to live near restaurants and bikeways; for employees, teachers and service providers seeking to reduce lengthy commutes.

The Housing Element plans for all kinds of housing, both market rate and affordable. But it is the affordable housing that gets all the attention, so let’s talk about that. The Housing Element

includes a chart [Figure II-13] that shows “low income” for a family of four is \$88,800. That’s about the base salary of a Supervisor’s Aide.

The Housing Element also plans for housing for those at a much lower income level. Many speakers on September 17 put a “face” on who needs an affordable place to live. That message was echoed in a letter we received from a resident of senior housing:

. . . without the availability of affordable housing at The Fireside Apartments, I would be homeless. Didn’t expect it. Couldn’t have planned for it.

The question then becomes a moral issue, I believe. Is affordable housing of value to the County? Does a diverse population – financially, as well as ethnically – serve the public good and build a stronger community?

The only reasonable answer I can offer is: “There, but for the grace of God...”

In preparing this Housing Element, our planners focused on mixed use sites and sites that are already zoned for attached housing. There is no proposal in this Housing Element to rezone traditional single family neighborhoods to higher density attached housing. That is the right approach.

Concerns have been raised that the County is proposing high density development like Cabrini Green in Chicago – which had 3,607 units – or Pruitt Igoe in St. Louis – a huge housing complex of 33 11-story buildings with 2,870 apartments. Those kinds of massive public housing projects have nothing to do with this Housing Element.

As you have heard, for this cycle the county is planning for 773 units of all kinds of housing, including market rate. For the next cycle, that number drops to 185. The sites list includes properties in many areas of the county – that’s appropriate. People want to live in various areas of the county, not just in one place.

But I want to focus on Tam Valley and Strawberry.

Three sites in Tam Valley are included on the Housing Element site list:

“Manzanita mixed use” – this site is .58 acre and is already zoned at 30 units/acre, and is already entitled for two market rate and 1 affordable unit.

"Old Chevron" site at Shoreline & Flamingo - the site is .79 acres and is already zoned at 30 units/acre. Our planners propose "counting" 10 units of affordable housing towards the

County's Housing Element requirement -- this sends a signal to a developer that 10 units, and not 30 units as permitted under current zoning, is a more appropriate number of units should anyone ever seek to develop the site.

"Armstrong Nursery" site - the site is 1.77 acres and is currently zoned at 20 units/acre. Our planners propose "counting" 10 units of moderate housing towards the County's Housing Element requirement -- this sends a signal to a developer that 10 units, and not 20 units as permitted under current zoning, is a more appropriate number of units should anyone ever seek to develop the site.

These signals benefit Tam Valley.

The Housing Element acknowledges the severe traffic conditions and potential flood hazard on the Armstrong Nursery site in particular.

These conditions and limitations would be expressly considered in a project EIR, should there be an actual application to develop this site or the Old Chevron site. Some claim that the Housing Element throws CEQA out the window – that is not true. [More here?]

For Tam Valley, in sum, there is no proposed change in zoning and the total number of units is 11 affordable and 12 moderate or market rate. This is no Cabrini Green.

The SEIR for the Housing element adds a new mitigation measure that requires that the environmental review process for future development applications take into account potential sea level rise impacts and incorporate adaptive strategies to address these impacts.

And a new proposed CWP policy would require environmental review to include a health risk analysis for projects near roadways that pose potentially significant odor/toxics issues under BAAQMD standards.

These programs directly respond to concerns raised by Tam Valley residents.

Only one site in Strawberry is included in the Housing Element site list:

Golden Gate Baptist Seminary – this site is 73.5 acres and has had a Master Plan since 1984 creating certain development entitlements, including 93 units of student/faculty housing. Our planners propose “counting” 25 units of affordable housing and 20 units of market rate housing towards the county’s Housing Element requirements. That’s 45 units total – significantly less than the 93 units the property owner could build under current entitlements.

Important issues have been raised by the community as to whether 20 units of market rate housing and 25 units of affordable housing is permitted under the Strawberry Community Plan and the Seminary Master Plan. The Seminary could still propose student/faculty housing. If it doesn't, it would need to seek to amend the Strawberry Community Plan and the Seminary Master Plan – each of which would entail a lengthy public process and review by the Strawberry Design Review Board, the Planning Commission and the Board of Supervisors.

For Strawberry, in sum, the total number of units is 25 affordable and 20 market rate out of a total of 773 units countywide. Concerns have been raised that Strawberry already has a lot of rental housing and that's true. But the Housing Element does not mandate whether these units should be owner-occupied or rental and the total number of units does not burden Strawberry more than other parts of the county with properties on the Housing Element site list.

Concerns have also been raised about the possible impact of 45 units of housing on local schools. If the Seminary stayed on the property and built the housing currently envisioned under the Master Plan, it would have the same or greater impact on the schools.

The Housing Element proposes one other change to the Seminary Property – to re-zone two acres to 30 units/acre to create an AH overlay. And here I must object.

The current zoning, RMP-2.47, already permits multi-unit housing and already permits clustering. Plus, the current entitlement of 93 units of student/faculty housing likely already contemplates multi-unit housing, at least to some degree.

Planning staff took the right approach in focusing on properties with existing zoning that could potentially accommodate future housing. I would like to stick to that approach. The Seminary has until the end of the year to submit a revised development proposal to the County. Let's keep the current zoning in place and see what they propose. I therefore cannot support the proposed AH overlay and zoning change on two acres of the Seminary property.

- Supervisor Kathrin Sears
September 24, 2013