I have been disturbed about recent comments that mischaracterize the fundamental intent of Assemblymember Marc Levine’s budget trailer bill SB 106 that extends Marin’s suburban designation, for purposes of developing affordable housing, until 2028. But when Tucker Carlson from FOX News snidely calls this bill hypocritical, I have to take pen in hand to refute.

The original bill was proposed after tremendous community angst was generated through the 2015 Housing Element process. As the Unincorporated County began identifying potential sites for development of affordable housing at a density of 30 units per acre, many in the community questioned the appropriateness of the density requirement – which was a direct result of Marin’s metropolitan designation. Marin had the same density requirements as San Francisco, Oakland and San Jose; however in terms of population, geography and land use characteristics, Marin is more similar to Sonoma and Napa, counties designated as suburban with a default density of 20 units per acre.

The classification as metropolitan resulted in a number of unique challenges for Marin: Marin provides significant agriculture and open space values to the Bay Area, with approximately 85% of unincorporated Marin County lands having restrictions that preclude urban development (parks, agricultural and watershed easements); smart growth principals encourage higher density housing near transit and employment centers – infrastructure that is not common in Unincorporated Marin; and allowing minimum densities at 20 units per acre is more conducive to both design compatibility with the scale of existing communities and building community support for affordable housing.

Many in Marin were frustrated with our ability to meet state-mandated housing requirements and wanted to see more flexibility for local governments to meet those requirements. As these mandates come from the State, I have long maintained that legislative changes are the best avenue to achieve this.

I first began working on this effort in 2011 with then Assemblyman Jared Huffman and asked if he would consider carrying a bill to change Marin’s designation. After meeting with and finding consensus with both affordable housing advocates and with community groups protesting housing density requirements, Huffman agreed to carry a bill, AB1103. While some parts of his bill passed, the designation change did not.

In 2012 when Assemblyman Levine was elected, I begin working with him on the same effort. On September 30, 2014 the Governor signed Levine’s AB 1537 into law, changing Unincorporated Marin, the City of Novato and the City of San Rafael’s designation to suburban, with a default density of 20 units per acre (all other Marin jurisdictions were already designated as suburban).

The change in designation does not reduce the number of affordable housing units Marin must plan for - it changes the minimum density requirement. It also does not preclude us from developing at a density higher than 20 units per acre, if appropriate and desired for a particular project.

My involvement in these efforts did not result from a lack of commitment or interest in building affordable housing in Marin, but in an interest to provide Marin with more flexibility in the planning and development of affordable housing.

I am grateful to Assemblyman Levine that he saw an opportunity during the budget negotiations to extend Marin’s suburban designation and acted on it. SB 106 designates Marin what it has always been, a suburban County. Now it is up to its municipalities to continue efforts to provide housing opportunities for our hardworking residents who otherwise wouldn’t be able to afford the high cost of living in Marin. We must also find housing opportunities near transit so that congestion, which greatly impacts our quality of life, can be reduced.
In other news, last week the Board of Supervisors had the pleasure of appointing 23 youth to serve on the Marin County Youth Commission for the 2017-2018 school year. The turn-out and quality of applications received was one of the most robust we’ve seen – the youth of Marin County are active, dedicated and passionate! I am pleased to announce we have four commissioners serving from Novato, and I want to thank them for their time and commitment. Congratulations to Joshua Espulgar-Rowe, Dajahnaee Straten, Gabriel Ural and Marlowe Ural, I look forward to working with them on issues important to the youth in Novato and Marin.

As always, please contact me if I can be of assistance to you. You can reach me at jarnold@marincounty.org or 415-473-7331.