



Blueprint for new homes in Agoura

CITY HOUSING UPDATE

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CURTAINS FOR THE REGENCY—One of two formal applications for multifamily housing in Agoura Hills calls for the removal of the city’s only theater, which opened as the Mann 8 in 1990. Homes and shops are expected to replace it. JOHN LOESING/Acorn Newspapers

Now that the City of Agoura Hills has completed its latest progress report on the status of housing development across town, some groups are alleging that the new construction required by state law will endanger the city’s already crowded evacuation routes used in emergencies.

Litigation against the city and its latest housing plan is working its way through the court.

Each city in the state was required to submit an April 1 report to the California Department of Housing and Community Development outlining the previous year’s housing unit applications, approvals and completions to see if they are meeting their Regional Housing Needs Assessment goals outlined by Sacramento.

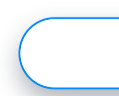
Agoura Hills must satisfy the state’s latest RHNA demand that 318 new dwellings be available in the city by the end of the decade. A portion of the units must be affordable to low-income occupants. That doesn’t mean all the units will be built, only that the city must adjust its development plans to allow for the units.



✓ **NEW HOUSING SITE?**—Representatives from two environmental groups say this garden store—2.6-acres at Dorothy Drive where one of the oldest businesses in the city is now situated— would be a good place for new affordable homes. It’s one of 20 Agoura locations that planning officials have deemed suitable for housing development. JOHN

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To date, the city has identified 20 housing “opportunity sites” across the city, including the Kanan shopping centers.

In a subsequent lawsuit filed in Los Angeles County Superior Court, the activist group Protect Our Emergency Evacuation Routes (PEER) alleged the environmental study upon which the city’s latest housing update represents “a failure to conduct any meaningful analysis of the project’s impacts and its current ability to respond to large-scale emergencies, such as a wildfire.”

The case will be heard June 25 at Superior Court in Alhambra. PEER wants a judge to set aside Agoura Hills’ 2022 housing certification and to find the city in violation of the California Environmental Quality Act.

“What the PEER lawsuit would have us do is remove sites and density, but (the state) is going to make us find those sites and that density elsewhere, and our council was aware of that, so they said we believe it’s appropriate where we identified it and we believe it’s going to be safe to evacuate the people in that location,” said Denice Thomas, Agoura Hills community development director.

Although developer interest in the shopping centers has yet to materialize, the sites remain problematic because of the stress that the new traffic would place on the Kanan Road evacuation route. Other sites, the opponents say, seem better suited to accommodate the state’s urgent call for new housing.

“There are alternatives where housing fits,” said Mary Wiesbrock, founder of Save Open Space and a supporter of the PEER lawsuit.

“Agoura Hills has alternative sites where the placement of higher density per acre of state-mandated housing would not congest our vital Kanan evacuation route,” said Rae Graulich from PRISMM (Protectors and Residents in the Santa Monica Mountains), another group seeking to limit the scope of new housing in the city, in a letter sent last year to the Agoura Hills City Council.

Graulich and Wiesbrock recommend placement of homes, many of them affordable, on a 2.6-acre parcel at Dorothy Drive where Colorful Garden Center, a plant nursery and one of the city’s oldest businesses, is located.

“The noncontroversial two-acre nursery site is on a bus route and has easy access to the freeway,” Graulich said. “Evacuation here would not affect the Kanan evacuation route.”

The nursery parcel has the potential for up to 65 units, but Graulich says the site could safely host more.

“It is possible to increase the number of affordable units on this site by increasing the percentage of affordable and number of units per acre, as neighboring cities have done,” Graulich said.

Agoura Hills is being more restrictive with its per-parcel density projections than its neighbors, she said.

“Neighboring cities have found creative ways to increase the number of allowable low-income residences. Agoura Hills seems to be holding to 25 units per acre, yet, Calabasas has sites that are 42 units per acre, and Westlake Village has several locations at 32 units per acre,” Graulich told the Agoura council.

Things aren’t that simple, however.

“Every community has to jump through different hurdles, Thomas said. “It’s not like it’s a one-size-fits-all kind of approach.

“(The state) had a very restrictive and stringent set of criteria that we had to meet in order for them to support and certify our housing element” she said.

Of Agoura Hills’ 20 designated sites, only nine have drawn developer interest.

Of those nine, five property owners have submitted preliminary applications and two have submitted formal plans, including the Regency Theatres center on Agoura Road, a 7-acre parcel built as the Mann 8 Theatres, the city’s first movie house in 1990, where a developer has proposed repurposing the existing buildings and putting in some 275 apartments. The Regency redevelopment project has permission to start pulling its permits, the city said.

Another developer, Northern California-based Edri Construction, has an application under review targeting two vacant lots across Agoura Road from the theater that would contribute an additional 33 units to the city’s housing stock.



INSTEAD OF THEATER—The builder who owns the Regency Theatre parcel on Agoura Road proposes a mixed-use development consisting of a new four-story apartment building containing 278 units, parking garage, and roughly 5,200 square feet of commercial space. The project is located on the northwest corner of Agoura Road and Cornell Road and will provide affordable housing for 28 qualifying very low-income and 10 qualifying low-income families.

“The fact that the overlay is intended to create a ‘by right’ approval process—thus eliminating all future (environmental) review for these future housing projects—is significant because it means the city will not have any future opportunities to evaluate the projects’ direct, indirect or cumulative impacts on emergency response or evacuation, or to require any mitigation measures if the impacts are significant,” the PEER lawsuit says.

Although the clock is running on the city’s effort to move ahead with its new housing, it will take time before homes are built and results start to show.

Bharat Shah, owner of the Colorful Garden Center, said his landlord told him he probably wouldn’t have to vacate for at least another three years because it will take that long to obtain government funding to build the affordable housing being considered for the nursery location.

Still, Wiesbrock is pleased.

“This could be 100% affordable (housing),” she said. “It’s perfect.”

The 80-year-old Shah, who’s operated nurseries in Agoura Hills for more than half his life, said he won’t be sad to leave his business when the time comes.

“I’m ready to retire,” Shah said. “I don’t care.”

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