

OPINION > COMMENTARY

Marin Voice: Fairfax vice mayor responds to recall push



By **STEPHANIE HELLMAN**

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Stephanie Hellman serves on the Fairfax Town Council. (Alan Dep/Marin Independent Journal)

The deceptive and misleading allegations of the Fairfax recall petitioners distort facts and distract from our real challenges — housing, infrastructure and fire safety. This recall is an unjustified, expensive distraction, costing taxpayers \$60,000 or more to relitigate decisions voters have already made.

I was elected in 2019 and reelected in 2022 with more votes than any other candidate. I now serve as vice mayor. It's been an honor to serve my community and I have done so with integrity. I'm proud to have helped secure a fully staffed three-person fire engine after more than 20 years of inaction. I have supported the Wall Property acquisition, effective climate policies, small business relief during the COVID-19 pandemic, fiscal responsibility and programs for older adults and low-income families.

This recall isn't about better governance — it's about resisting progress and undermining the will of voters. Sadly, our beautiful town is experiencing toxic, divisive MAGA-style tactics — disinformation, personal attacks and manufactured outrage designed to sow division. Fairfax deserves leadership, not political theater.

In a prime example of “disinformation,” recall proponents falsely claim that Mayor Lisel Blash and I have mismanaged the town budget. The truth is that independent financial audits have given Fairfax top ratings and our cash reserves have ranged from 26% to 40% during my tenure.

Fairfax’s roads are in poor condition due to over a decade of neglect and years without a public works director. Experts advise fixing them will cost over \$30 million — far beyond our \$15 million annual budget. Some suggest drastic cuts, but even eliminating the entire police department and town staff wouldn’t cover the cost. Other Marin towns have tackled similar circumstances by determining that a bond measure would be the only viable solution.

Like all California cities, Fairfax must comply with state housing laws. Every eight years, we must submit a “housing element” plan to the state to address the housing crisis. Our plan for the 2023-31 cycle identifies sites for housing across all income levels, with 62% designated for very low- to moderate-income households.

I find many recent state housing laws frustrating, as they weren’t effectively designed for high fire hazard communities like ours. But ignoring them isn’t an option — the recall proponents’ call to “fight the state” is reckless. Noncompliance could lead to fines of up to \$100,000 per month, multiplying by a factor of six if unpaid. In 2023, I requested the town formally appeal Fairfax’s requirement to plan for 490 housing units. Our appeal, along with those of nine other Marin jurisdictions, was denied.

The reality is that dozens of state housing laws have dramatically reduced local control. One example: Certain housing projects now go through a streamlined, “ministerial” process, meaning if they meet pre-established standards, they must be approved without a discretionary review process. It is highly likely we will see this play out in the near future with pending development projects.

During the process of creating the housing element, the property owner of School Street Plaza informed the town of his desire and intent to develop the site, which was then rezoned to accommodate residential use. The plan anticipated up to 175 units. When a pre-application was submitted for 243 units, the mayor and I were just as shocked as the community. The community has already raised serious concerns, and we have urged the developer, Mill Creek Residential of San Francisco, to hold a community forum. So far, it has not agreed, which is deeply disappointing.

Meanwhile, recall proponents are spreading false claims that the mayor and I approved Mill Creek's "Death Trap Tower." Nothing could be further from the truth. The final application is expected in May. If Mill Creek won't hold a community meeting, the mayor and I will.

Now more than ever, we must distinguish fact from fiction. Let's get back to truth and civility. Let's work together on real solutions.

Stephanie Hellman is vice mayor of Fairfax. Learn more at Fairfax4Civility.org.

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2025 > **April** > **6**