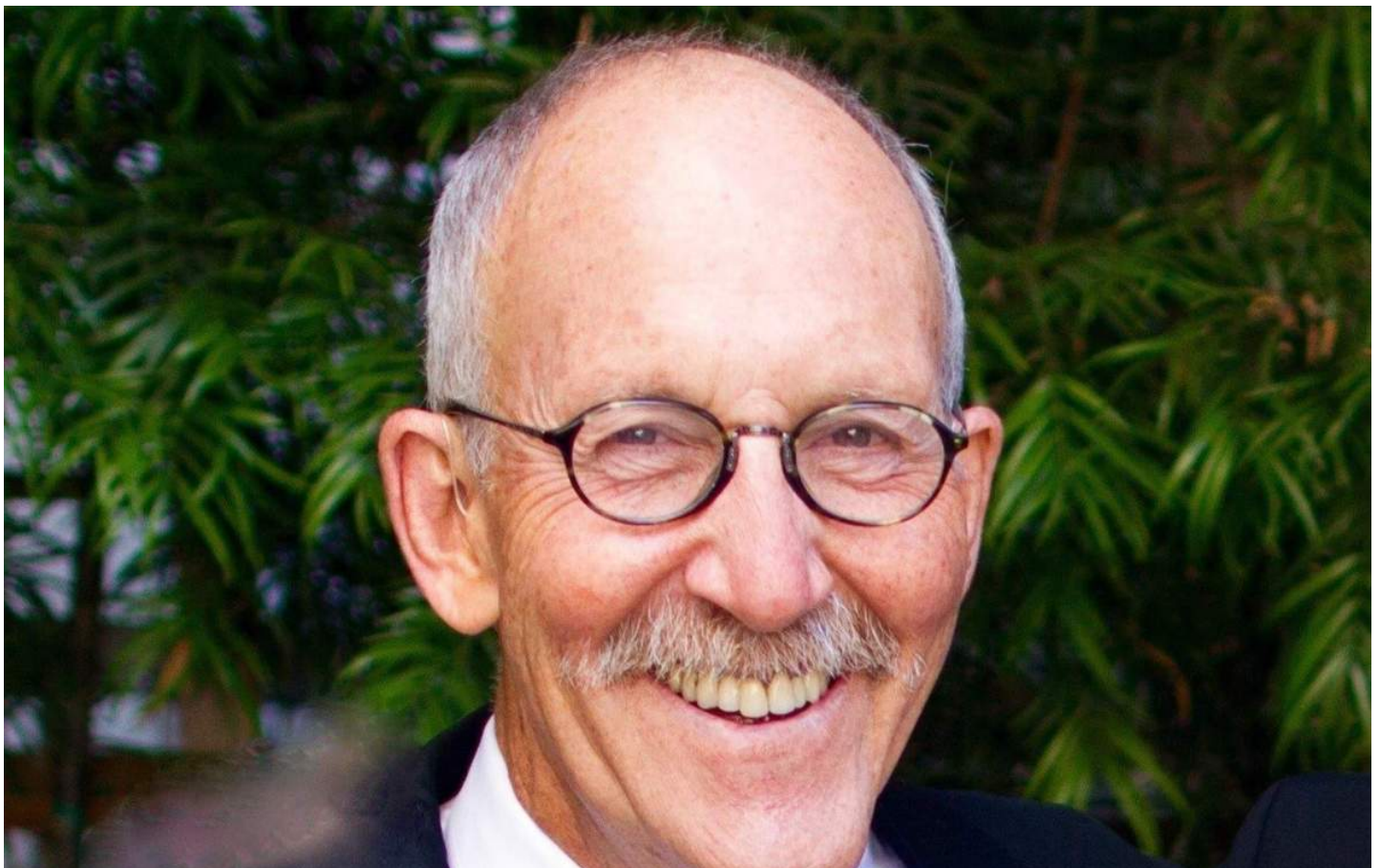


In housing crisis, we live with our contradictions





Pete Golis

It's no surprise that California can't solve its housing crisis. Many Bay Area residents of a certain age are still trying to decide if they want to solve the housing crisis.

While Bay Area residents hope local communities will “build their fair share of housing,” according to a new poll, a majority also opposes efforts to increase the housing supply by limiting local land use regulation.

We know this: Many people like their communities the way they are, and they don't like giving up the authority to keep them that way. While they endorse the promise of new housing, they're not so sure about new subdivisions and apartment complexes near them.

Faced with state sanctions, the Sonoma County Board of Supervisors recently approved a plan that envisions construction of 3,824 new homes in the next decade, but supervisors weren't pretending to be excited by the idea. “We really don't have a lot of discretion in our discussion today,” said Supervisor Susan Gorin.

More than six months past the deadline, the action responds to a state law giving local government a choice — approve a housing blueprint or risk granting developers an exemption from local planning rules.

On the same day, supervisors expressed consternation that the developer of the former Sonoma Development Center property in Glen Ellen announced plans to increase the number of housing units from 600 to 930. The developer's change of plans threatens the fragile compromise between developers' business needs and the concerns of folks who worry about impacts of new development.

“I was blindsided,” said Gorin, who represents the area.

For Sonoma County, this is politics as usual. The past 30 years of political conflicts have taught us that people fear what new construction can bring — traffic, the loss of open space, a drain on municipal services.

And politicians like to keep their constituents happy.

People want others to have a place to live. They just don't like the inevitable disruptions, they don't like change, and they're suspicious of what new development may bring.

But there is a problem. Employers can't find workers because people are priced out of the housing market. Working-age people are leaving in search of a place they can afford to live. And some who might want to live here have decided the price is too high.

As baby boomers age out of the workplace, people must wait months for an appointment with a doctor or a dentist or a veterinarian. Sometimes, they can't find one at all. Businesses are closing (or leaving) because they can't hire the people they need. Highways are clogged because

people who still work here must drive long distances to get from a home they can afford to their Sonoma County jobs. If you're an employer, you know this story.

Once upon a time, people wanted to live in Sonoma County, and they may still want to live here. But the cost of housing pushes them away. The population keeps declining as young people move on.

The New York Times reported recently that 20- and 30-somethings find themselves paying more and more for rent, which is why a third of them still live with their parents.

According to a recent Public Policy Institute of California opinion survey, the Bay Area remains the only region in the state where a majority of voters opposes easing land-use restrictions to promote more housing.

Recall that then-Gov. Jerry Brown once told The Press Democrat, "The problem is, you people don't want housing up there."

The narrative with the PPIC poll results shines a bright light on how different generations come with different attitudes about housing: "Homeowners are divided, but renters overwhelmingly support a requirement to build affordable housing and do not think localities should determine the kinds of housing built."

It goes on: "Even as Californians insist they want affordable housing to be available, their own housing preferences contradict this demand. People prefer single-family homes over condos or townhomes by an overwhelming majority — even if they need to drive a car to commute and get around locally. Just three in ten would choose a condo or townhome that is convenient to public transit."

Houses grow larger and larger, while people wonder why housing costs more and uses up more land.

While there may be widespread resentment of state intervention, local officials can't claim to be surprised. The lack of affordable housing has been an issue here for a long time.

We have seen over and over again how high-flown promises fail to produce results. There's always some new idea that is going to make things better. Along the way, we decided it's OK not to judge whether these ideas actually work.

As California morphs into the land of haves and have-nots, the cost and availability of housing surely belong on a short list of culprits.

"Shrinking California still dreams but more modestly," read a headline last week in the New York Times.

Over time, self-interest will require making sure that more workers have a place to live.

Meanwhile, we live with our contradictions.

The dictionary defines ambivalence as having mixed feelings or contradictory ideas about something or someone.

And that sounds about right.