

Supervisors approve housing plan

SDC developers look to leverage loophole to build additional units

By EMMA MURPHY

THE PRESS DEMOCRAT

The threat of incoming development applications exempt from local planning regulations shaped the Sonoma County Board of Supervisors' Tuesday deliberation over the county's past-due housing plan.

Following hours of discussion, the board unanimously voted to approve the housing blueprint, which outlines where and how to facilitate 3,824 housing units within the next decade. It will now go to the State Department of Housing and Community Development for review before final adoption.

The plan passed with a few alterations, which included: changing some parcels in Forestville, Graton and Penngrrove, and directing staff to explore a tax program for vacant properties.

The board's vote came well behind the county's Jan. 31 deadline, a delay that allowed developers to use a builder's-remedy law to pursue projects despite the lack of an updated housing element. So far the county has received applications for seven projects under the builder's-remedy rules.

"We really don't have a lot of discretion in our discussion today," said Supervisor Susan Gorin. "We have to meet our RHNA numbers and move this along to the state."

RHNA stands for the Regional

Housing Need Allocation, or assigned housing units, given to local jurisdictions.

Adoption of the housing element means developer can no longer submit projects using the builder's-remedy. It also makes Sonoma County eligible for state funding earmarked for affordable housing projects.

Cities and counties must update their housing elements every eight years, per state law. Under that same law, local jurisdictions are assigned a certain number of housing units from low-income to above-moderate income.

This cycle, the Association of Bay Area Governments allotted 3,824 housing units for Sonoma County to place outside of cities, more than seven times the mandated 515 units in the area during the past cycle.

The county's housing unit allotment jumped so drastically this cycle because urban growth areas historically assigned to cities instead remained under county jurisdictions, said Jane Riley, director of housing policy at 4Leaf Inc., a county consultant.

Of the 3,824 units, the state requires that 1,024 must be very low income units, 584 must be low income, 627 must be moderate income and 1,589 must be above moderate income.

There are a few paths to satisfying the 3,824-unit allotment. The county is able to apply proj-

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ects already in process — totaling 1,388 units — and projected accessory dwelling unit creation — totaling 816 units — to the quota.

For the remaining units, the county's plan has identified a number of parcels that could accommodate development sites but about 31 of those sites required rezoning. The board endorsed such a move with its vote Tuesday.

Urban-centered growth and limited infrastructure

Sonoma County's plan identifies nine areas across unincorporated Sonoma County that could accommodate more housing within the next eight years. The areas include Sonoma Valley, the outskirts of Santa Rosa and Cloverdale, and the lower Russian River stretching from Guerneville to Forestville.

Some have criticized the plan's inclusion of more rural communities over concern about the strain it would put on limited infrastructure, including sewer, and the lack of access to resources, including public transportation, that urban centers offer.

Residents — many from Graton — and some supervisors echoed those concerns Tuesday.

"It's more than bicycle lanes, it's roundabouts and traffic lights and lots of things," Gorin said. "We are not prepared for this level of development in the unincorporated areas."

The county had initially hoped some of the cities, including Santa Rosa and Sonoma, would take on some of the housing allocation in favor of city-centered growth. However, Cloverdale was the only one to agree and accepted 57 of the county's 3,881 units, reducing the county's responsibility to 3,824.

Supervisor David Rabbitt said he had hoped more cities would agree to take on some of the county's allotment, but noted that cities did not want to do so because they would be liable should they fall short of creating enough housing by deadline.

As discussion turned to whether to remove or change sites on the inventory, Rabbitt argued for the board to keep all recommended sites to allow for flexibility and hopefully lower density.

"It's 1.3 units per day for eight years," Rabbitt said of the allotment. "In my mind more sites, more better."

Pushing back against insinuations that residents who objected to specific sites were part of the "Not In My Back Yard" crowd, Hopkins said she does not see their concerns as NIMBYism.

"This is a planning conversation," Hopkins said. "Communities have been stripped of their abilities to plan, they don't have the infrastructure, they do have carrying capacity concerns."

Hopkins said she hoped the county can reach an agreement with Santa Rosa in the future.

"We want to put them in city centers, with transit, with jobs," Hopkins said of new housing units.

An '11th hour' builder's-remedy project

The most recent builder's-remedy project to land in county planners' inbox was for the hotly debated Sonoma Developmental Center. The application arrived late Monday at the "11th hour," Scott Orr, assistant director for Sonoma County's planning and permitting department, told the board Tuesday.

The application outlines 930 housing units, including 120 priced at below-market rates, and a mix of commercial, office and other uses including a cafe with a 120-plus room hotel and a beer garden.

The plans detailed in the builder's-remedy application are a sharp increase from the 620 housing-unit plan, the board endorsed in December of last year.

Gorin, who represents the district encompassing the site, called the news "unwelcome."

"I had a good feeling for the development team and this just smacks the community in the face, the county in the face and the board in the face," Gorin said. "To have this come out of left field is just insulting."

Orr said the county is still evaluating whether the project meets the builder's-remedy criteria. He added that about 200 units will apply to the county's assigned housing unit allotment this cycle, Orr said. *You can reach Staff Writer Emma Murphy at 707-521-5228 or emma.murphy@pressdemocrat.com. On Twitter @MurphReports.*



At Sonoma Developmental Center, proposed developers are seeking a builder's remedy to add additional housing units to the county-approved plan.

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