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City Housing Element Conditionally Approved

By Cathy Tyson

Just last week the Department of Housing and Community Development in Sacramento conditionally approved Lafayette's draft Housing Element that was submitted back in January. A number of earlier drafts had been submitted that were not in compliance. Like all municipalities in California, Lafayette is required to provide a plan to accommodate its fair share of low income housing. For the current planning period, that is 361 units. City administrators prefer to locate those units in the downtown core, close to shopping, services and transit. The January draft of the Housing Element spells out reasoning behind that preference: "Affordable housing projects require funding from outside sources, whose criteria now almost universally require development projects be located near a variety of services. Projects not meeting the location requirements do not get funded. Therefore, to locate multifamily housing away from services into the more rural areas of the City would actually produce the opposite effect: it would mean affordable housing would NOT be built."

"(City Manager) Steven Falk and I are extremely happy to receive the letter from the State Department of Housing and Community Development stating that our element will comply with State housing element law when adopted and submitted to HCD. I am proceeding immediately with the adoption of the revised element," said Niroop Srivatsa, Planning and Building Services Manager.

"The element now includes sufficient programs to encourage redevelopment of underutilized sites," said Glen Campora, Assistant Deputy Director of the Department of Housing and Community Development in a letter to Srivatsa. The letter goes on to outline six conditions necessary for approval - from adoption of the Downtown Specific Plan to ensuring sufficient capacity of suitable sites for the development of emergency shelters.

Not everyone is thrilled with the conditional approval. "The result is disappointing but not surprising," said Mike Henn, former Planning Services Manager. "Affluent cities like all the Lamorinda cities provide no more than lip service to the State Fair Share housing requirements. A small staff of State planners in Sacramento, responsible for over 500 cities and counties, have no idea if a city's representations are honest. The State law is fairly toothless, in that it provides for no real penalties and there is no enforcement."

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