

Easy solutions for affordable housing elude panelists

High land costs, NIMBYism make development difficult

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Litigation costs, a lack of available land and costly building fees were some of the barriers that officials cited Wednesday at a public meeting on the lack of local affordable housing.

The comments made at Wednesday's meeting, which was hosted by the Democrats of Napa Valley Club, are not new.

A year ago, to better understand the lack of affordable housing, the county formed a task force charged with finding ways to build more affordable residences. Despite a host of recommendations from the committee, meant to help pave the way for more projects, production has been painfully slow.

Meanwhile, the city of Napa — along with other local jurisdictions across the state — recently submitted an updated housing element report that showed Napa has only built about 700 new housing units since 2007, when it was aiming to build 2,100. A community forum in St. Helena on Tuesday night was dominated by public criticism of that city's failure to meet its regional housing goals.

More than 100 people showed up at Wednesday's meeting to ask questions and learn what local leaders are doing to solve this issue. They left with familiar responses: The recession and the loss of state redevelopment funds are major culprits responsible for slow home building locally. But, as some pointed out, little has been done in recent years to change the situation.

"We should have been thinking about this problem 20 years ago," said one visibly frustrated audience member.

Napa City Councilman Alfredo Pedroza, who participated in the panel discussion, said that there has been enough talk in the past few years about the need for affordable housing. He said he's ready to see some action.

"We need to quit saying that affordable housing needs to be a priority and actually make it a priority," he said. "We've talked about it for a long time, we know the need is there and we know it's not going away. Our younger working professionals are the ones being priced out of Napa. It's the kids coming out of college who can't live here."

Solutions

Pedroza said that there are several ways to increase the number of local affordable housing projects. He suggested that cities partner with developers to push such projects forward. He said the city of Napa currently owns several properties it is considering donating to developers specifically for affordable housing units.

“Part of the high costs associated with building affordable projects is how much land costs,” he said. “But if the city already owns land and a developer only has to think about building the project, it can become an economic reality for many developers.”

Napa County Supervisor Bill Dodd, a panelist who is running for state Assembly, said that cities should also partner with the county to build more affordable housing. He said that affordable housing should be developed in urban area, close to services and schools.

“We have 29,000 workers in the county of Napa that commute here to work,” he said. “That’s way too many. It’s important for the county and cities to find more opportunities for housing at all levels, and to make sure that housing is built in easily accessed areas.”

Dodd pointed to the coming Napa Pipe project — located next to Napa city limits in the unincorporated county — as an example of such partnerships. The project is expected to provide up to 900 new residences, of which 20 percent must be affordable.

Rex Stults, government relations director for the Napa Valley Vintners, said the local wine industry is committed to providing more affordable housing for its workers. He cited grapegrowers’ decision to, in effect, tax themselves to generate revenue to support the county’s three farmworker centers.

“We put our money where our mouth is,” said Stults. “This is a shared concern and we would be happy to explore any and all solutions.”

And while officials were pleased with their continued efforts to build more affordable housing throughout the county, they admitted that more work needs to be done.

Litigation, NIMBYism and expenses

Clearing governmental tape in order to build affordable units is often difficult, said panelist Kathleen Dreessen, the executive director of Napa Valley Community Housing, a nonprofit.

“To be eligible for the federal grants and tax (credits), we have to use the highest quality materials,” she said. “We go before planning commissions and we are told our projects need more landscaping, or more green features. And we’re not arguing. We are happy do it. But it increases the project’s price.”

Dreessen agreed with Pedroza that land is extremely expensive in Napa County and emphasized the need for local politicians to provide housing sites for less affluent community members.

But even when procedural hurdles, such as planning commissions and city councils, are cleared, residents themselves often derail affordable housing projects. Though many in the community point out the need for affordable developments, few are excited when a developer purchases a lot next to their home.

Advocates cited Napa Creekside Apartments — a 57-unit affordable housing project off of Valle Verde Drive in north Napa. Despite being approved by city staff and boards, the project was sued by a group of neighbors who claimed it would negatively impact the nearby Salvador Creek.

“This project has been tied up in court for four years because of one single individual who has been able to use (environmental) law to hold up the project,” said Larry Florin, the county’s director of housing and intergovernmental affairs. “We’ve spent almost \$900,000 fighting the lawsuit to date.”

Panelist Ken Frank, board chair of the Napa Chamber of Commerce and executive chef and owner of La Toque restaurant, pointed out that affordable housing projects have to go somewhere.

“We have NIMBYism in this area,” he said, referring to the phrase “not in my backyard,” which describes neighbors who don’t want development near their homes. “We have an agricultural preserve in place in the county and we want to protect it. But it means that our affordable housing has to go into cities — next to homes. We need to accept that.”

Another joint city-county affordable housing project, called the Oak Creek Terrace complex on First Street, wound up costing about \$16.7 million to complete. At 41 units, that means each residence cost more than \$400,000 to build — more than the average cost of building a new home in some areas.

“That is completely unacceptable,” said Pedroza. “We need to find ways to lower the cost of building these units. And we can. Developers have said they can build these units for about \$150,000, if they aren’t facing some of the roadblocks that currently exist. It’s time to start removing these.”