

Planners want backup for Napa Pipe housing County seeks contingency plan if project implodes

Having spent four years and nearly \$1 million legally defending three areas of rural Napa County as appropriate housing sites, county staff isn't willing to toss them by the wayside in the county's new housing plan.

That was the upshot of a presentation staff and consultants gave to the Napa County Planning Commission on Wednesday as they unveiled the county's new Housing Element, which details the housing plan for the next eight years.

The plan has an allocation of 180 units, which the Napa Pipe project should cover easily. But if that project implodes for any reason, the county would have to turn to the sites included in the previous housing plan, which are in Angwin, Moskowitz Corner and Spanish Flat.

An affordable housing advocacy group, Latinos Unidos Del Valle de Napa y Solano, sued the county in 2009 to challenge the appropriateness of those sites for affordable housing. The county won the case, which went all the way to a state appellate court.

The Napa Pipe project is moving ahead, having won its land-use approvals from the Board of Supervisors last spring that give its developers the potential to build up to 945 homes at the former industrial site.

But given the uncertainties that remain with the project, Director of Housing and Intergovernmental Affairs Larry Florin told the commissioners that contingency options are still needed elsewhere in the county.

Sites in Angwin, Spanish Flat and Moskowitz Corner are carrying allocations of about 400 units from the previous housing cycle, 2007-2014, into the new housing plan.

"There are still some significant hurdles," Florin said of Napa Pipe. "If Napa Pipe doesn't occur, we're left with, 'What do we do now?' Those were the viable affordable housing sites. We made the case to three different judges. We still believe that."

Commissioners Bob Fiddaman and Terry Scott agreed with that logic.

"If you take them out it will be very hard to put them back in," Fiddaman said.

Scott said the Napa Pipe project's future seems promising as plans call for it to be annexed within the city of Napa, but prudent planning requires the inclusion of the additional areas.

"To a great degree, that will hopefully live in the city," Scott said. "I think we need to plan for if that doesn't occur."

Public comment on the draft housing plan encouraged county officials to reconsider the Angwin, Spanish Flat and Moskowite Corner sites, and more residents argued that case to the commissioners Wednesday.

Angwin resident Kellie Anderson, a member of the steering committee for Save Rural Angwin, endorsed sites on Monticello Road, near the Silverado Country Club, that were included in a previous Housing Element in 2004.

A developer proposed using the Monticello Road sites for affordable housing in 2006, but later abandoned the project after balking at the cost of purchasing the land. These sites were removed the housing plan in the 2007-2014 update, in favor of placing units at the Napa Pipe site.

Anderson argued that the Monticello Road sites were more appropriate for housing because of their proximity to services in the city of Napa, rather than in Angwin. SRA has said it supports the affordable housing sites in Angwin, but Anderson argued that the county should reconsider.

“Doesn’t that make more sense?,” Anderson asked. “We have alternative sites that should be considered.”

The planning commissioners said that the new housing plan should have an easier process than the last one, which the state Department of Community Development refused to certify, and was subject to legal challenge.

Howard Siegel, a former county official who was hired as a consultant to help produce the new plan, noted that prior housing cycles had allocations of 1,900 units and 650 units, respectively.

The new allocation of 180 units was largely because of Association of Bay Area Governments plans to locate the majority of Bay Area housing units in its largest cities, Oakland, San Francisco and San Jose.

“We’ve come a long way,” Siegel said. “The 180 seems like a much reasonable requirement for an unincorporated area.”

Commissioner Matt Pope said that the county still must work to provide housing for farmworkers, who a recent study showed are staying in Napa County on a longer term basis and need housing for families. The county’s three housing centers don’t serve families, and Pope said he advocates working with the state to address the issue.

“This is a population that our economy is very, very dependent on,” Pope said. “What more can we do?”

Fiddaman said the situation the county finds itself in currently is a vast improvement over the battles of the last Housing Element.

“We’ve got a much lower hurdle to get over this time around,” Fiddaman said.