

Affordable housing Novato's way

NOVATO — like other jurisdictions — is required by the state to accept our “fair share” of affordable housing and to identify parcels of land where this housing is to be built. Failure to comply can lead to stiff penalties and lawsuits.

Last year, Novato set out to meet the state requirements. Over 300 low-income affordable housing units in high-density clusters were proposed next to existing single family neighborhoods.

A firestorm of protest ensued.

Concern about higher crime in this type of housing was a major issue for many. The controversy set neighborhood groups against housing advocates leading to an erosion of civility and mistrust of government.

In my opinion, the imposition of housing requirements by the State is the root cause of the protest:

The state projects housing numbers based on a thriving housing market, strong economy, plentiful jobs and unlimited land. Yet the housing market is depressed, the state is broke. Businesses are leaving and Novato has limited land.

The state also assumes that jurisdictions won't provide housing unless required to do so. Yet Novato has provided a wide variety of affordable and market-rate housing for many years.

The state only counts housing types financially viable for developers to build. But housing types should fit neighborhoods and local needs.

The state takes over more local land use control. But

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Novato and other jurisdictions know best how and where to provide housing and use their land.

Where do we go from here to reestablish harmony in our community and at the same time provide appropriate housing for Novato?

I recommend two concurrent strategies:

Strategy No. 1: Seek repeal or reform of the state housing requirements. This will be difficult but not impossible.

A countywide group is identifying specific legislative reforms. Marin cities and the County need to support this effort and ask Assemblyman Jared Huffman and State Senator Mark Leno for help.

Other jurisdictions around the state have similar concerns. There is strength in numbers so we need to join with others requesting state legislators to reform housing requirements.

If lobbying efforts for state reform fail, a statewide initiative

— or legal action — prohibiting the state from controlling local land-use decisions should be considered.

Strategy No. 2: Develop a Novato Housing Plan that reflects our town and do it our way.

Determine appropriate mix of commercial and residential land use for Novato's remaining land:

For residential land, determine what types of affordable housing best serve Novato:

▶ Include existing affordable housing — even what the state doesn't count.

▶ Impose management and screening standards on existing affordable housing with focus on safety that must be implemented and enforced.

▶ Set densities and number of units compatible with adjacent land use and health and safety of occupants. 10 to 20 units maximum per acre for most housing should be the norm — including density bonus.

▶ Favor affordable housing mixed with market rate housing.

▶ Limit clustered affordable housing to senior projects like Rotary Nova Ro.

Soon the City Manager's Housing Working Group will make recommendations to the City Council for discussion and ultimately for decisions.

We must remember that Novato is our town, not the state of California's town. Working together we can make the best decisions for our town.