

County faces deadline on housing plan

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Group urges supervisors to focus on affordable homes

By Claudette Langley

A newly formed citizens group wants some answers from Calaveras County officials about affordable housing here.

Concerned Citizens Promoting Housing Opportunities for All sent a letter Jan. 30 to the Calaveras County Board of Supervisors, asking the board to focus attention on getting a completed housing element for the county's general plan update. The group points out that the element is state-mandated and must be completed by Aug. 31.

"We have gone to several Board of Supervisors meetings and brought up the housing element," said Holly Mines, who is representing the Calaveras Planning Coalition in the new group. "There has been no response."

The group's letter asks the board if it will direct staff and/or the consultants to begin preparing the new housing element; whether anyone from the Planning Department has been assigned to work on the element and for an update of how many units of housing for low and very-low income residents have been completed.

Signing onto the letter are Catherine C. Bourland, executive director, Human Resources Council; Zerrall McDaniel, Citizens for San Andreas; Frank Meyer, manager for Habitat for Humanity Calaveras; Cathryn Jackson, Wallace Citizens Serving Residents; Noel Helmbrecht, vice president Habitat for Humanity Calaveras board; Joyce Techel, MyValley-Springs.com, and Ira Glasser, a member of Calaveras County Association of Realtors.

Supervisor Merita Callaway said that the Central Sierra Planning Council had done the footwork to create the housing plan. She said, however, that there are several factors involved when determining the need and the housing allocation.

"What is low or very-low income?" she asked.

Further Callaway said that the economic downturn and housing construction limits potential projects that could create the housing. She said that there are also some houses that may be under the radar, including manufactured homes or in-law units.

Calaveras County is required to plan for 1,286 affordable units in its element, the letter from Concerned Citizens stated.

Jackson said that the county actually excluded the housing element from the general plan update in the meetings that she attended. She said that she was told that Mintier Harnish, the consultants working on the overall plan, would not be assigned the housing element as part of their contract.

Jackson said that her group is looking for the county to adopt an inclusionary approach to affordable housing, which would require developers to include a percentage of affordable housing in their projects.

She said if the developer chose not to build the housing they would then be required to contribute money to someone who was developing the units.

Callaway said she completely understands the need for affordable housing in Calaveras County.

"We need affordable apartments," she said. "Anyone in this county making under \$15 an hour can barely afford to live here."

Callaway added that she wants to be sure that any retailers who plan to come to Calaveras consider the housing needs of its potential employees. Finding out where the housing element is in the process is a bit of a challenge. The spot that it would fill in the county's baseline report which accompanies the general plan update is empty except for the following: "California State Law requires that general plan housing elements be updated more frequently than the rest of the general plan (every five years) and approved by the Department of Housing and Community Development. The background information in the existing Housing Element adopted by Calaveras County in May, 2005, has not been updated for this report." County Administrative Officer Bob Lawton had not answered emails or returned calls as of press time and County Counsel Jim Jones said he was not involved in the housing element process at this time.

If the county fails to complete and submit the housing element in time it does face some repercussions from the state. According to information from the California Housing Law Project: "When a local government fails to adopt an updated housing element, or adopts an element that does not comply with the law, the general plan is invalid and a local government may not proceed to make land use decisions and approve development until it has adopted a valid housing element."

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