

Marin officials weigh planning changes to spur housing density

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Marin officials might amend the county's general plan to permit denser housing in environmentally sensitive areas and areas lacking water and sewer service.

The Board of Supervisors and the Planning Commissioners held a joint meeting Tuesday to discuss changes to the general plan to allow more housing. The county is under a state mandate to zone for 3,569 more residences in the unincorporated areas over eight years, beginning in 2023.

The general plan allows development to occur only at the lowest end of the density range in the Ridge and Upland Greenbelt, the Baylands Corridor, areas with sensitive habitat and areas without water or sewer connections.

"These policies have proven to be a constraint to housing development," Tricia Stevens, a consultant with Berkeley-based MIG, told officials on Tuesday.

Marin County is paying MIG \$1.6 million to help it update the housing and safety elements in its general plan.

State law requires Marin to allow developers to build a minimum of 20 residences per acre, but under state density bonus laws developers can boost the size of their approved projects by up to 80%.

A number of other changes related to the general plan were also discussed Tuesday. One calls for general plan standards for development to take precedence over those contained in the county's 21 local community plans. Another calls for eliminating a rule that limits development on parcels being annexed by a municipality to the lowest end of the density range.

Officials also talked about shifting the City Center Corridor boundary into the Inland Rural Corridor to include all or a portion of the Buck Institute for Research on Aging site just north of Novato.

Both Don Dickenson, president of the Planning Commission, and Supervisor Dennis Rodoini questioned the wisdom of amending the plan to allow for denser development in environmentally sensitive areas throughout the county. They suggested allowing the denser development to occur only at sites that the county identifies in its housing element to meet its state mandate. An environmental impact report (EIR) is underway on a list of 79 sites where 3,929 new residences could be constructed in Marin.

"Rather than removing all the restrictions, why don't you refine the boundary to take out the area that is considered appropriate for development," Dickenson asked.

The Marin County Community Development Agency is proposing to rezone a large enough portion of each site on the county's housing element list to meet the overall goal of 3,569 residences, plus a 15% buffer.

Extra sites are necessary because the state requires the county to maintain an adequate number of sites throughout the eight-year period to meet its assignment. If a site is developed with fewer homes than anticipated, the county must add additional sites. The state requires jurisdictions to maintain a minimum buffer of 15%.

It is possible that the EIR underway now will identify constraints on some sites that limit development potential and can't be mitigated. If that occurs, the county will have to add more sites to its list.

The EIR is scheduled to be published on Sept. 23 and a public workshop on the document is scheduled for Oct. 18. The California Department of Housing and Community Development is reviewing a draft of Marin's housing element, including its site list, and is expected to provide its comments, which could necessitate significant changes, in October.

Jillian Zeiger, a county planner, said Tuesday that the new densities established for the housing element sites will directly influence how large a buffer the county will need. The higher the densities are, the lower the buffer will need to be.

Many of the officials at the meeting, as well as members of the public who commented, expressed concern about the weighty changes being proposed and the county's overall loss of control over future development. Several speakers objected to the idea of making community plans subordinate to the county general plan.

"Marin's history of collaborative community planning has safeguarded irreplaceable habitats and the natural resources that sustain our human and natural environments," said Ashley Eagle-Gibbs, legal and policy director at the Environmental Action Committee of West Marin. "I'm not really sure how density can



Chris Desser, a planning commissioner, said she is “very sympathetic to so many comments made by the public that our hands are utterly tied by the state Legislature.”

“We’re doing the best we can under very constrained circumstances,” she said. “You should write a letter to your representative in Sacramento if this is something you’re concerned about.”

Supervisor Damon Connolly said he has been hearing from people concerned about the effect that changes in the county’s general plan might have on the number of housing sites planned at Old Gallinas Children’s Center in Santa Venetia and the Marin County Juvenile Hall site in Lucas Valley.

Supervisor Stephanie Moulton-Peters asked what the proposed amendments might mean for the project that a developer is seeking approval for at the former seminary site in Strawberry. An EIR is being prepared for the project.

“This housing element does not propose any change to the zoning of the Seminary site nor any change to the Strawberry Community Plan,” said Tom Lai, the county’s community development director.

Lai sought to reassure the officials about the changes under consideration.

“We’re not using this as an ability to site development in environmentally sensitive areas,” he said. “We will not be approving homes in wetlands or on top of streams.”

Rollie Katz, executive director of the Marin Association of Public Employees, one of the few people to speak in support of the state mandate, said, “We don’t want houses built on wetlands, and we don’t want houses built in fire zones, but we need to build more housing.”

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