

Low-income housing project on 100 block of Main St. approved

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A permit for a 42-unit low-income rental-housing project proposed for the 100 block of Main Street was approved by the Watsonville City Council last night.

The project, known as La Posada, is being proposed by the Salinas-based Community Housing Improvement Systems and Planning Association.

It consists of 12 two-bedroom, 22 three-bedroom and eight four-bedroom apartments, with patios and two small playgrounds, 90 parking spaces, grassy areas and a number of trees. Access to the project will be from Front and Rodriguez streets. Eight-foot-high masonry walls will be built on the Main Street and Riverside Drive sides as sound barriers.

The cost of the project is about \$6 million.

The council approved the permit after some discussion about whether Watsonville residents and earthquake victims could be given priority for the apartments, the appropriateness of the site, and whether the parking provided by the project would be adequate.

Questions about the site were raised by Pedro Castillo, a member of the League of United Latin American Citizens. Castillo said he wasn't opposed to the project, but said there were hazards to children because of the busy streets, a bar is on the same block and the

high walls would be targets for graffiti. He suggested murals be painted on the walls.

In bringing up those issues, Castillo referred to another proposed low-income-housing project that has been delayed by criticism of the appropriateness of its West Beach Street site.

But City Councilman Oscar Rios said there are a limited number of places left to put housing, and all of them have their drawbacks.

"A lot of people are living in trailers, in substandard houses, in garages that should be abandoned," he said. "There are people sleeping in sleeping bags along the river. This is one project that is looking ... positive."

Several council members asked Hector Burgos, the property manager for the project, if there was any way city residents, and especially those who were displaced by the earthquake, could be given priority.

Burgos said that wouldn't be possible because the housing group has to be careful not to discriminate, and not to appear to discriminate, against any group of people.

Councilwoman Betty Murphy said she was disappointed with that, particularly because the project has received \$750,000 from the city from funds given to it by the Red Cross to rebuild housing after the earthquake.

But Burgos said the project had also received quite a bit more from the state and was required to be non-discriminatory. He said rentals would be advertised primarily in the Watsonville area.

"We're not interested in telling all the world we've got 42 units," and then have to turn hundreds away, he said.

Castillo also said inadequate parking would mean that visitors would park in the surrounding neighborhood, in front of other people's homes and driveways, and "it'll become a problem for the city."

CHISPA has asked the city to allow it to create 33 less parking spaces than are normally required.

Burgos said if the city stuck to its parking regulations, it would mean fewer apartments. Watsonville's requirement is higher than that in five nearby cities CHISPA surveyed, he said, and other CHISPA projects have found 1.85 spaces per unit to be sufficient.

Murphy said she was worried about setting a precedent by allowing fewer parking spaces at La Posada.

But Mayor Todd McFarren said he was frustrated with all the talk about parking problems. He said he has never had to park more than a block away anywhere in the city.