

What to do about housing

Watsonville council endorses some ideas

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The Watsonville City Council voted last night to support in concept a number of recommendations by its Housing Task Force, including requiring developers to offer up to 25 percent of the units in new housing projects at relatively affordable rates.

However, the council put off taking action on the other highly controversial recommendation — rent control — by agreeing to create a study group to hash out compromises.

"This is an historical night," Celia Organista, of the Community Action Board, told the council be-

fore the vote. "In many ways, you were elected because we expect this from you," she added.

A large crowd attended the council's second public hearing on the matter last night, spilling out of the council chambers and nearly filling the lobby outside as well. A handful of people addressed the council, including people who supported or opposed rent control and one west side property owner who said developers are already being asked to pay for infrastructure and can't afford to pay for low-cost housing as well.

The Housing Task Force found that in order to address critical

overcrowded conditions, the city needs to repair all earthquake-damaged units, plus build an additional 2,600 new affordable units now and 90 new affordable units each year.

The task force report also charged that some landlords are taking advantage of the tight housing market to raise rents and to rent dilapidated units, and found "there are no existing mechanisms that will prevent rents from climbing further out of reach of the population."

The council went through each one of the task force recommendations, giving a general stamp of approval to most and deferring

others for more study. The city staff will work out details and return the recommendations to the council before it takes final action on any of them.

The vote on the inclusionary ordinance, which would enable the city to require that as much as 25 percent of each housing development consist of "affordable" units, was 6 to 1, with Councilwoman Betty Murphy dissenting because she said she thought 25 percent was too high considering the county only requires up to 15 percent.

"(The 25 percent requirement)

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The home of Maria Estrada, the 600 block of Lincoln Street, yesterday.

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might make it harder to attract the housing we need," Murphy said.

The vote to set up a rent control study group consisting of a representative of tenants, a representative of property owners, and a councilman, was unanimous.

On the task force's other recommendations, the council:

- Referred for further study the idea that the city should waive or reduce certain off-site infrastructure requirements for developers, such as parks. The waivers would only be for housing developments which set aside 40 percent of the units at rates affordable to households with incomes well below the median.

Staff will be studying whether, as Murphy said she feared, such a move would lower standards, resulting in worse neighborhood and living conditions for poorer people.

- Agreed that it would be a good idea to urge Santa Cruz, Monterey and San Benito counties to adopt a 25 percent inclusionary ordinance.

- Agreed to see if there are ways to insure that residents of the Pajaro Valley have first shots at any affordable housing that's built.

- Agreed that Planning Department staff should study the recommendations to expand city boundaries to the northwest in the Buena Vista Road area. Planners should also study the idea of a higher-density zoning designation than the city now has for certain areas.

- Agreed 6 to 1, with Murphy dissenting, that the city should launch an amnesty program for "granny units," or illegal rooms added on to houses and rented out. Under the program, the city would forgive fines for such units if owners voluntarily brought the units up to code and charged af-

fordable rents.

Murphy dissented because she said she was afraid it would mean more unacceptable living standards for poor people, but other council members said they thought it would improve just such units which already exist.

- Agreed to take the lead in trying to keep the FEMA trailers, which are currently housing families displaced by the Oct. 17 earthquake, in the Pajaro Valley beyond the 18-month period FEMA usually allows following a natural disaster. The council agreed in concept to look into acquiring the trailers for permanent or interim low-cost housing and to work with other agencies in finding places to put the trailers.