

Council studies housing plight

Lack of affordable housing is spur

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Watsonville is looking at ways to provide more low-income housing in the wake of state Sen. Henry Mello's call for an "inclusionary ordinance" and of residents' complaints of overcrowding in their neighborhoods.

Councilman Tony Campos announced last night that he's trying to get developers, builders and architects together to brainstorm ideas for an inclusionary ordinance that everyone could swallow.

An inclusionary ordinance — under which a housing development would have to include a certain number of affordable units — might prevent the kind of overcrowding that drew several Manor Avenue residents to last night's meeting to complain about men living in a garage in their neighborhood, Campos said.

Councilman Rex Clark said he intends to unveil a similar proposal in August.

"I think certainly the time has come, and I agree with Mr. Campos, it's something we ought to take another look at," Clark said.

The council's main objection to such an ordinance has been that the burden of paying for lower-income housing falls on

the buyers of the remaining homes in a development.

The council has summarily rejected the idea in the past, but Mello suggested when he came to town last Friday that the council consider it again.

Mello was here to discuss the controversial "Franich bill," which would allow Watsonville to annex attorney Tony Franich's 72-acre apple orchard without local review, provided the city met a list of conditions.

Among the conditions is a requirement that 15 percent of all homes built on the property be affordable. Mello focused on the affordable-housing aspect as his reason for supporting the bill, but added that Watsonville should require affordable units in all new housing developments.

Adoption of a citywide inclusionary ordinance could make the Franich bill more palatable to those who think its affordable-housing provision is being used merely to camouflage the other issue of sidestepping local control.

Meanwhile, City Manager John Radin said the bill passed from a Senate committee yesterday to the Senate floor, with the added requirement that the affordable-housing element be recorded as a deed restriction to prevent it from getting knocked out of any development.

Campos suggested several ways affordable housing might be made part of city developments without placing the burden on home buyers. Developers might get priority-processing of their plans or be granted density bonuses, wherein a developer could build the affordable portion of his project above the density normally allowed, he said.

Campos also said the council should consider "zero lot-line" subdivisions, where houses might have only a side yard; credits to developers building three- or four-bedroom homes; private streets built to lower standards than the current ones; and high "in-lieu" fees that would encourage developers to build affordable housing

rather than pay the fees.

He also suggested questioning the Housing Authority of Santa Cruz County about building homes, rather than rental units, that would be affordable to low-income people.

City Attorney Don Haile said he had already contacted Mary James, director of the Housing Authority, and she indicated "she would be very interested" in working with the city on an inclusionary ordinance.

Mayor Betty Murphy said she agreed with many of Campos' suggestions, and praised Watsonville voters for overwhelmingly passing Measure B in the June 7 election, approving construction of more affordable housing.

"I think it shows that the whole community is concerned with affordable housing," she said. "I'm really proud of Watsonville."

Meanwhile, Radin and Haile said they're working on ways to discourage landlords from allowing overcrowding of their rental units, after the issue was raised by Manor Avenue neighbors.

Watsonville Fire Chief Gary Smith said last week that fire officials would be doing more follow-up investigations of homes already warned about overcrowding, and would seek a legal remedy if necessary, but Manor Avenue residents said problems still exist on their street.

Haile said he's seeking to prevent landlords of overcrowded dwellings from collecting rent.

"The bottom line is, we want to find a means to take out the profit motive," he said.

REFERENCE

