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HOUSING

# Alameda to allow construction of new apartments

Alameda's City Hall  
Courtesy of The Island

Island city changes decades-old zoning rules, paving the way for affordable housing

by [Aaron Glantz](#) — July 11, 2012, 12:01 a.m. 4

For the first time in nearly 40 years, the city of Alameda has zoned large swaths of land for apartment buildings.

The City Council's vote paves the way for new affordable housing in the city, which residents have tried to block for decades.

The new zoning plan came eight months after a community group called Renewed Hope Housing Advocates threatened to sue the island city. The group argued that Alameda's ban on new apartment construction, which voters approved in 1973, violated California law.

"State law doesn't say you can prohibit apartments on every single inch of your city," said Laura Thomas, president of Renewed Hope Housing Advocates.

Under state law, every city must have a general plan that outlines how and where it will grow. As part of those planning documents, a city must show where it plans to build both single-family homes and apartments, including affordable housing. If the plan does not comply with the law, the city cannot compete for state parks and transportation funds.

After last Tuesday's vote, Alameda has now zoned 17 locations throughout the city for developers to build a total of 2,420 apartment units.

Had Alameda failed to change its zoning rules, the city faced losing tens of millions of dollars in regional transportation funds over the next four years, City Manager John Russo wrote in a memo to City Council members before the vote.

The city could have also lost millions of dollars in state funding for local parks designed to support affordable housing.

And if Renewed Hope Housing Advocates filed suit, Thomas said, Alameda could have lost its zoning authority.

A number of Bay Area cities, including Corte Madero, Benicia, Fremont, Berkeley and Rohnert Park, have been sued for violating the same state law.

In January, the city of Pleasanton rezoned 73-acres to accommodate 2,326 units of affordable housing, after it was sued by the nonprofit group Urban Habitat. Pleasanton paid \$2 million in legal bills before settling the suit.

"The penalties for not complying have ratcheted up," said Andrew Thomas, Alameda's planning services manager. "We didn't want to go down a similar road, waste money and lose."

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Alameda has changed dramatically since voters approved the ban on new apartments. In 1973, the island was a conservative military town that seemed a world away from neighboring Oakland, where the Black Panther Party was active and Symbionese Liberation Army had just assassinated the superintendent of the city's public schools.

Then, 90 percent of Alameda residents were white. By 2010, the city's white population had dropped to 45 percent, according to the U.S. census. Today, two of the five members on the city council are Asian Americans, and the mayor, Marie Gilmore, who is also a councilwoman, is African American.

The Naval Air Station, which was once at the center of the city's business and civic affairs, has been closed for 15 years.

Many of the sites zoned for new apartment construction are near the old military base, across the harbor from Oakland. Some of those sites once housed restaurants and other commercial buildings.

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**Ed Baker**

a year ago

Reply

The article infers that when the zoning laws were put in place it was to keep Alameda White. I was living in Alameda at that time and my step-father was one of those deeply involved in the creation of the zoning law. Several organizational meetings were held at our house and there was a lot of supper table conversations about the issue. The primary reason the zoning movement got started was not racial, but rather architectural. A group of citizens was concerned that Alameda's victorian houses were being torn down and replaced with apartment units - they looked at San Leandro as an example of what they did not want to happen in Alameda. At that time "affordable housing" was not a term, and while people who moved into apartments were less affluent than those who rented or owned houses in Alameda those were still mostly lower middle class whites. Preserving the racial

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...here. And by the way, census data, the demographics in Alameda shifted after 1973, despite the housing restrictions that Renewed Hope says are racist. Our reporter needs to do some more homework.



**Jack Mingo**

a year ago

[Reply](#)

Sorry, Glantz, but the other commenters are right. Alamedans are justly proud of their history and Victorians. If you actually looked at the history of the time, dozens of lovely historic buildings were being torn down by developers and replaced with cheap and ugly cinderblock apartment buildings, leaving gaping wounds in neighborhoods we proudly showed visitors, increased parking problems, and traffic jams at the few points of entry and exit to and from the island. There is little evidence that racism had anything to do with it.



**Alameda Pt. Enviro**

a year ago

[Reply](#)

I have to agree with other commenters. There were many factors that led to the multi-family ban, but racism was not one of them. The amount of racism in Alameda in 1973 was not likely much different that the rest of the country. And just to remind Mr. Glantz, back in 1973 it was common for minorities to be kept out of communities, whether as homeowners or renters, by means of simply throwing their offers or applications in the trash. Special zoning or building restrictions were not necessary. Another of the reasons mentioned by longtime residents was the filling in of South Shore, which is lined with apartments and condos, and the filling in of Bay Farm Island to create Harbor Bay. It wasn't an influx of non-whites, but rather an influx of cars that got many residents concerned. Alameda has only five ways in and out. The article also does not inform readers about the hundreds of single-family homes that were converted to apartments to supply housing for military personnel over the decades. The second paragraph suggests that residents have always been against affordable housing. The most noteworthy part of the story is that a clearly defined zoning plan for multi-family housing has been established. What will be interesting to follow is which ends up happening first: New multi-family housing, or parks and transportation funds from the state that otherwise would have been denied. In other words, is anyone actually going to build anything affordable for people to live in?



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