

The Alamedan

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Council okays plan allowing multifamily housing

Michele Ellson

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The City Council on Tuesday approved new zoning rules allowing the development of multifamily



(<http://thealamedan.org/sites/default/files/styles/large/public/clinton.jpg>)

housing in Alameda for the first time since Measure A passed in 1973. The vote was 4-1, with Councilman Doug deHaan casting the lone "no" vote.

The new multifamily housing zoning will be applied to 10 properties slated for housing development and were approved as part of a new housing element to be included in the city's general plan. The element lays out how much housing can be built in Alameda and where, and Alameda's has been out of compliance with state law since 1991 primarily due to the city's development limits, correspondence between the city and the state Housing and Community Development department shows.

"In the end, what the hard work of the staff has led to is something that is a common-sense and pragmatic and practical approach," Vice Mayor Rob Bonta said.

DeHaan said the city has already taken steps to ensure affordable housing is built, though city staffers argued those steps weren't enough to appease state housing officials who refused to okay prior housing elements the city submitted. DeHaan also questioned whether the city did enough to notify residents about its plans, prompting an angry response from City Manager John Russo, who said city staff did plenty to keep residents informed.

Andrew Thomas, the city's top planner, said the council needed to approve a new housing element in order to qualify for millions in state transportation funds and to avoid lawsuits that have snagged other communities that have restricted housing development in violation of state law.

"If we delay, and we get sued, please put aside a big war chest. Because you'll need it," Thomas told the council.

The new housing element has been championed by affordable housing advocates who have been pushing the city to reach compliance for years. They have argued the city has a moral obligation to provide housing for people with a variety of needs, and at a variety of income levels, legal obligations notwithstanding.

"Alameda is in dire need of more diverse residential options to house a diverse range of Alamedans. I support this not just because it's state law, but because it's a rational and minimal way of complying with state law," said Deni Adaniya, an Alameda resident and affordable housing advocate.

But the plan stirred anew concerns about traffic and safety that are routinely raised when housing development is proposed, and others that Tuesday's vote would open the door to more densely packed development Island-wide.

"I was on the council for three terms, and we worked hard to uphold Measure A. We were able to uphold it for 40 years. You are the first council that proposes to undermine it," Karin Lucas said. "If you want to change it, put it on

the ballot and let us vote on it.”

Lucas said cities are routinely out of compliance with the state’s housing element law, and other speakers asked for more time to work on the city’s housing element before the council approved it. But Thomas and other city leaders said the state has increased the penalties for noncompliance and that the city needs to act quickly to avoid those penalties.

City leaders said the housing element only requires the city to show they have enough land zoned to allow construction that would meet housing needs numbers determined by the regional Association of Bay Area Governments and the state, and not to develop the housing. They said specific development proposals would still be required to go through an approval process and to address traffic and other impacts they would create.

They said the new zoning scheme will help, rather than harm, Measure A by protecting it from a potentially fatal legal challenge.

“If we go to court, they’ll compare Measure A and state law, and that’s the only thing the court will look at. And that’s a problem for us,” Mayor Marie Gilmore said. “We will lose Measure A for the entire Island forever.”

The three-hour debate over the new housing element – which had originally been slated for a quick voice vote but gained interest over the last few weeks as word of it circulated in e-mails and on local blogs, drawing nearly three dozen speakers to Tuesday’s meeting – raised the specter of onetime Alameda Point developer SunCal and its high-density development plan for the Point along with those of what some perceive as the exclusionary nature of Measure A.

“I love living in Alameda, but I feel like there’s a lot of people in our city who don’t want a lot of outside people coming in,” Austin Tam, who supported the new housing element, said.

The new housing element, which will be in place through 2014 if the state okays it, is required to show the city has enough land zoned for construction of 2,420 new homes. The city will allow apartment buildings and other multifamily housing to be built on 10 sites, including a portion of the Alameda Landing site, the North Housing site on Singleton Avenue, the site of the former Chevy’s restaurant on Mariner Square Loop, the former Shipways site, Alameda Marina and the Encinal Terminal and Del Monte sites.

Measure A allows for the development of 21 units of housing per acre; developers building homes on properties where multifamily housing is allowed could build 30 units per acre with just the zoning overlay, and up to 48 units per acre if certain conditions are met. Thomas said the Starbucks building on the corner of Park Street and Central Avenue holds 54 units per acre.

Enacted in 1969, California’s housing element law requires cities to adequately plan for their existing and future housing needs in order to ensure an adequate supply of housing for families at all income levels. Alameda has worked for the past five years to gain state approval of its housing element – one of seven in its general plan – but other efforts to win state approval were unsuccessful.

Prior to adopting a new housing element, city leaders signed off on an inclusionary housing ordinance that requires developers to make 15 percent of the homes they build affordable for people with lower or moderate incomes; okayed a density bonus ordinance that lets homebuilders create bigger developments if they build more affordable housing than required; and approved new rules allowing homeowners to construct in-law units on their property.

In addition to allowing multifamily housing, the new element will smooth the way for development of emergency shelters, single-room occupancy hotels and transitional housing.

Related: [City preparing new housing plan \(http://www.thealamedan.org/news/city-preparing-new-housing-plan\)](http://www.thealamedan.org/news/city-preparing-new-housing-plan)

It’s a (multi)family affair

Here are the 10 sites where multifamily housing will be allowed under the new housing element.

Alameda Landing (portion)
Alameda Marina
Chevy’s site (former) on Mariner Square Loop
Chipman site on Buena Vista Avenue
Coast Guard/North Housing site
Del Monte building/Encinal Terminal/

Neptune Point
Ron Goode Toyota (former)
Shipways site on Marina Village Parkway
Stargell site

Source: *City of Alameda*

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10 Comments

Submitted by Mpomeroy on [Wed, Jul 18, 2012](#)

Your coverage of this issue puts our local newspapers to shame. You should definitely be on the cities list for press releases, and they should be using you to get the word out about these very important issues. The problem which culminated in such a large turnout at city hall last night stems from the fact that many people have lost confidence in the integrity of our city government, and therefore feel outraged when suddenly confronted with what seems like a threat to our quality of life. Better communication would have gone a long way to alleviating this feeling of paranoia and unease. The local papers are just not cutting it.

Submitted by Hugo on [Wed, Jul 18, 2012](#)

After living in Oakland for 13 years, I gave up and moved to Alameda. I heard that that politics here were more difficult than Oakland. Now when I see all this about "affordable housing" I wonder if Alameda is going to become like Oakland with all the graffiti and crime. I guess my anxiety is taking over.

Submitted by hobnob on [Wed, Jul 18, 2012](#)

Michele is a great journalist, I miss you and the Island! But now you got this new snazzy site :) So all is good.

"I love living in Alameda, but I feel like there's a lot of people in our city who don't want a lot of outside people coming in," Austin Tam, who supported the new housing element, said.

- Actually, I think what Austin Tam is hitting on isn't the fact that Alamedians are afraid of letting outside people coming in, but letting the WRONG type of people come in.

I lived on Poggi when we first moved to Alameda (for the "ghetto" area of Alameda that was pretty tame in my opinion) and was informed that what is now Summer House use to have a lot of gang activity and the city FINALLY cleaned that up. So the city was able to remove some of that gang, drug, violence element from the city.

Now about 8 years later, with the economy in the toilet, there is more burglaries, violence, robberies, guns, even a few murders in Alameda that didn't happen before. I know the violence might be spilling from Oakland.

In no way am I saying low income people are criminals but the thought of affordable housing may bring in thoughts of having more people who might bring the criminal element back into Alameda. I have to admit that "affordable housing" brings that thought into my mind as well. However, I'm well aware that there are a lot of hard working and honest people that need affordable housing, but there is also the other side of that coin and that fear and anxiety might be why Alamedians fight so hard and make it feel like we don't welcome outsiders. Comparative to other cities, Alameda is really safe, I don't want to see it get unsafe.

Submitted by Laura Thomas on [Wed, Jul 18, 2012](#)

Michelle, you did a good job on reporting on the entire housing element issue.

I want to respond to the commenter above on the issue of the former Harbor Island apartments, now known as Summer House. The city stood by and let the owners of that complex allow it to deteriorate. Many police calls from the residents were in response to its declining livability, but this was later used as evidence that it was all due to criminality.

The owners, a group of Florida investors, then evicted some 400 or so families, many of whom had lived there for 30 years, some were disabled, most law-abiding. Along with dislocating and forcing out of Alameda, so many former residents, it also caused a huge drop in the state funding for the Alameda schools -- about \$5 million. I guess it was the unintended consequence of a policy of looking the other way when low-income people and minority people are hustled out of town by private interests. You can pretend, as the city pretty much did, that there is not much you can do about it. There was a large outcry from the residents and supporters, but a weak effort by the city at the last minute, didn't stop the injustice.

Some of the families remained in Alameda, but many of them are homeless, even as they struggle to keep their children in Alameda schools.

Submitted by OmbudsBen on [Wed, Jul 18, 2012](#)

The problem is really quite simple. We on the west end have only The Tube to get on and off the island. Traffic is already horrendous all too often. If you are going to add more people, give us another way on and off the island. If you won't add a bridge or another tube or something, don't bring in lots and lots of people in multi-unit housing.

And please don't revive the canard about public transit. Lots of people commute places that would require hours of time and multiple transfers. We don't have unified transit like NYC or London or Paris. It's absurd to think people are going to opt for 3-4 hours of daily commute as opposed to 1-2 hours of driving.

We are an island. With limited access on and off. If you want to bring in multi-unit housing, require the developers to build ways on and off the island. After the housing is built, it will be too late.

Submitted by devanosky on [Wed, Jul 18, 2012](#)

I'm the publisher of the Alameda Sun. I'm proud and happy to say that we are Michele's print partner. We would have run this story on our front page, but our paper comes out every Thursday and goes to press on Tuesday a couple of hours before the city council met. Look for one of Michele's stories on the front page of our paper every week.

Submitted by Michele Ellson on [Wed, Jul 18, 2012](#)

Thanks, Dennis. We appreciate our partnership with the Sun and the opportunity you all give us to help tell these stories to a broad local audience.

Submitted by Kristen Hanlon on [Thu, Jul 19, 2012](#)

I find it troubling that many people in Alameda seem to think "affordable housing" is synonymous with "Section 8". There is a wide range of people who need affordable housing, and most of those people are working people, not criminals. The Bay Area is an incredibly expensive place to live, especially if you have a family and have a household income under \$80K. I think a lot of the reactionaries are people who must have bought their homes 15 or more years ago. They have no clue as to what it's like for young families today.

That said, I agree with other commenters who are worried about the increased traffic through the tubes. Anyone who has sat on a bus in the tube in heavy traffic knows how unpleasant that is-- the bus fills with exhaust fumes. Definitely not a healthy way to live.

Submitted by hobnob on [Thu, Jul 19, 2012](#)

Thanks Laura for that information, I was not aware that the previous owners just let the apt complex go into disrepair. I do know from reviews I read about Summer House a few years back that the new owner gave it a facelift only b/c a lot of problems and plumbing issues still existed in those apartments that were going \$1300-1500/month... which in my opinion was a lot of money for what you got from those apartments.

Anyway, Traffic on that side is a problem, the council really needs to figure out how to alleviate traffic before they go off half-cocked and build tons and tons more housing. BTW, talking about AC Transit, sure if you live on Webster to Santa Clara to Park to Encinal to High, then you're in good luck! B/c there is probably great transportation (buses) for you to ride in. If you live around the beach, well tough luck... b/c the W and the 20 are not all that dependable and not worth the 1 hour delays that you sometimes endure. I've waited for a 20 when 3 51 buses roll by, and an O, and a 21 as well. Not to mention there really is only 1 bus that goes sporatically to the Point.

Get real people, ferries that come by once an hour from 6am -8pm, buses that will be stuck in grid lock tunnel traffic, and excess cars on the road aren't going to cut it. Don't say use public transit. SF has the same problems and we should use that as an example. Sure Muni transports a lot of people, but it's constantly delayed and there really aren't that less cars, people still drive b/c it's waaay more convenient for them.

I'm not against the city thriving, but we are an Island, need real solutions for traffic.

Submitted by Karen Bey on Mon, Jul 23, 2012

I've been taking the ferry for well over 10 years and I don't understand why more people don't take the ferry. For those commuters who work in the city, it takes only 20 minutes to get to S.F. and parking is free. Recently a food truck has started selling hot drinks and muffins; and drinks and snacks are also sold on the boat.

One of the reasons that VF Outdoors selected Harbor Bay for their new campus was because many of their employees live in San Francisco. Their campus is a great model for what's to come. With the price of gas projected to rise, and the conveniences I mentioned above, my bet is that a lot more people will give the ferry a try.

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