

Mayor's Housing Plan a Tough Sell

Analysis

By Doug Epperhart



Recently, several community leaders from around the city were ushered into the mayor's conference room at City Hall to get the sales pitch for Villaraigosa's "mixed income housing policy."

The reception to this latest attempt at "inclusionary zoning" was lukewarm at best. One person loved it, everyone else questioned or criticized the proposal.

Briefly, the state requires that cities include a housing component in their general plans. The idea is to look ahead at how many and what types of residences will be needed to accommodate population growth.

According to materials provided by the mayor's office, Los Angeles needs about 13,000 additional dwelling units per year. Most of the families seeking these homes make less than \$90,000 per year. Yet, the lion's share of housing built in L.A. costs more than these folks can afford.

Villaraigosa's housing deputy, Helmi Hisserich outlined the proposed "Mixed Income Housing Policy." Among the points are the intent to put housing near employment centers and transit, require developers to provide housing for a variety of income levels, offer developers options to comply with the new requirements, and "stabilize" neighborhoods by working to prevent foreclosures.

Rather than simply forcing developers to include low-income units, this plan would allow them to pay in-lieu fees or make land donations. The plan also counts moderate-income (household making up to \$54,000 per year) units when qualifying projects. The city would also streamline the permitting process, reducing from 12 to two the number of departments developers would have to deal with to get permits.

Hisserich and Planning Director Gail Goldberg, who also attended the meeting, got an earful of the community activists, most of whom are neighborhood council leaders.

The city's typical "one size fits all" was a common complaint, particularly since the proposed policy would be administered by community plan area. Representatives from Panorama City and South L.A. pointed out they had more than their share of low-income housing. Guy Leemhuis, United Neighborhoods of Historic Arlington Heights, West Adams and Jefferson Park, said the plan offered nothing more than "stabilization of the ghetto."

Others raised the possibility of conflicting with community plans and zoning. Goldberg was quick to point out that community plans would be honored, something Joyce Pearson of Woodland Hills-Warner Center wasn't so sure about.

Jack Humphreville was blunt about the relationship neighborhoods have with their city government. He indicated that "trust and transparency" are the stumbling blocks that prevent honest dialogue with government.

Lost in the cloud of distrust of L.A. government in general, the mayor in particular, and what seems like a policy proposal intended to solve the problem of affordable housing, but may actually enable more development in an already-overcrowded city, was the reality of what is happening to the American economy.

Right now, maybe what the mayor should really be worrying about is building jobs, not houses. (Doug Epperhart is a member of the Coastal San Pedro Neighborhood Council governing board. He is a writer/publisher and a contributor to CityWatch. He can be reached at dougepperhart@cox.net.)