

Supervisor seeks changes in L.A. residential zoning proposal

Zev Yaroslavsky's suggested counterproposal aims to preserve existing affordable housing in the face of city incentives for developers to add taller and denser housing.

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September 27, 2007

Los Angeles County Supervisor Zev Yaroslavsky on Wednesday called on Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa to rework a proposal that would lift the city's limits on height, density or other planning rules for residential construction projects that have as little as one affordable housing unit.

Yaroslavsky said the proposed ordinance, in its current form, would spark a wave of demolitions in neighborhoods across the city -- with pricey, multi-story housing developments replacing smaller, rent-controlled apartments.

The proposal, which is scheduled for consideration by the council's planning committee next week, would apply to buildings that designate as affordable as little as 5% of the total units in a project.

"This is a wolf in sheep's clothing," he said. "There's a lot of talk about affordable housing, when as many as 95% of [the units] will be market rate.

"And for the number of units they do build, they get to build a bigger project, a taller project, and in the process you've displaced people who were living in more affordable units to begin with."

In a letter sent this week, Yaroslavsky offered a counterproposal, saying that unless changes are made, voters would refuse to support future affordable-housing bond measures. Villaraigosa has talked about pushing a successor to Proposition H, the \$1-billion housing bond that fell shy of two-thirds approval last year.

Villaraigosa said Wednesday that he had not seen the letter but predicted that an accord could be reached with the supervisor, who also is a former councilman. Councilwoman Jan Perry voiced doubts, however, saying Yaroslavsky's counterproposal would keep affordable housing out of affluent neighborhoods while concentrating subsidized units in poorer ones.

"In order to alleviate our housing crisis, we have to build affordable housing in every neighborhood, and right now that's not happening," she said.

Yaroslavsky spent weeks pushing behind the scenes for changes to the city's latest "density bonus" law, which would give a list of new incentives to developers who make part of their projects affordable to low- or moderate-income renters.

The debate between Yaroslavsky and the city's elected officials comes amid a major construction boom in Los Angeles, one fueled in part by the city's efforts to place new multi-story residential buildings along bus corridors and near rail stations.

The boom has sparked a backlash in some neighborhoods. And it has caught the attention of Yaroslavsky, who as a councilman co-wrote and won passage of a ballot initiative limiting growth in Los Angeles in 1986. Still, the package of developer incentives is popular with business groups who met with Yaroslavsky on Wednesday to discuss the issue.

Land-use lawyer Daniel Gryczman, who attended the meeting, said the two sides -- business groups and the proposal's critics -- could not reach agreement.

"The city's proposed ordinance is a compromise," he said. "It's a result of three years of very hearty discussion and compromise, and for the supervisor to come in at the last minute and destroy that compromise is a shame."

Planning officials also said the city is required under a 3-year-old state law to come up with ways of allowing developers to ignore rules regulating density, building height and the creation of open space when they build subsidized homes.

Gail Goldberg, the head of the city's Planning Department, said as recently as last week that she expects a relatively small number of projects to result from the new rules.

"It's not that easy to do the affordable housing . . . even with the density bonus, so I don't believe it's going to happen on a wide scale," she said.

Yaroslavsky has argued that other cities, including Santa Monica and Pasadena, are being far less generous than Los Angeles in offering the new incentives to developers. The supervisor called for several changes to the proposed ordinance, including:

- * Prohibiting height increases for development projects that are across the street from, or next to, properties zoned for single-family homes and duplexes;
- * Barring development incentives for projects in hillside zones, flood zones, historic preservation zones or streets with buildings that do not meet existing parking requirements;
- * Denying development incentives to any project that eliminates more affordable units than it creates;
- * Requiring developers to show that they have a financial need before being given permission to ignore certain city rules.

Until now, the city has allowed projects to be built under the state density-bonus law on a case-by-case basis. One recent project was a 59-unit building approved on Sepulveda Boulevard in Westwood.

By promising to include five very-low-income units in the building, the developer of that project received permission to construct 16 additional units. Yaroslavsky said the project will do little to address the housing crisis, since it replaces 31 rent-controlled apartments.

"You've taken 31 rent-controlled units and replaced them with 54 market-rate units and five affordable units," Yaroslavsky said. "So who's the winner in that equation? The market-rate developer."

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