

Added Residential Density Pondered in Housing Crisis: HOUSING IDEAS

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Los Angeles Times (1923-Current File); Mar 30, 1980;

ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Los Angeles Times

pg. V1

Added Residential Density Pondered in Housing Crisis

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Los Angeles homeowners in some of the city's most desirable areas—in the Valley, the West Side and parts of the Centinela South Bay—soon could find changes taking place in their neighborhoods of one-family dwellings as the city tries to grapple with its mounting housing crisis.

City officials are beginning to look at changes in zoning laws and planning policies which could lead to several families dividing up a large house, or allowing a "mother-in-law" cottage in neighborhoods now reserved for one family per lot.

Councilman Joel Wachs, whose North Hollywood-Hollywood Hills district includes many active homeowner groups and who has worked to protect "the integrity of single-family neighborhoods," said last week it is time to reconsider planning and zoning policies.

"We have to have better and more creative uses of existing housing . . . to change our zoning restrictions to allow a more intense and creative use of existing single-family homes," Wachs said during a meeting of the City Council's Grants, Housing and Community Development Committee.

"I know it's going to cause problems, that homeowner groups are going to be upset."

"But this attitude of 'We have ours, now you get yours' is no longer acceptable."

Wachs' remarks came in the wake of a city task force report on the increasingly dark housing picture. The report, released Monday, confirmed what many prospective homeowners and current tenants already knew—that it is

getting harder to find reasonably priced homes and apartments in most parts of Los Angeles.

Increased demand and soaring land and construction costs have pushed the median home price to \$115,000. Today's climbing interest rates are helping push home ownership out of reach of more and more families, the report said.

It also said there is little the city can do to provide housing and apartments for low or moderate-income families. The most the city, in conjunction with the federal government, could help build is just 15,000 housing units over the next five years. But the city needs 62,000 to 70,000 units a year to meet the demand.

"What this report clearly tells us," said Councilman Dave Cunningham, grants committee chairman, "is that government can't do it alone."

The report also recommends that the city find ways to entice developers into building more housing through incentives such as reduced parking require-

ments, higher density (allowing more homes on a given piece of property) and waived permit fees.

Cunningham is expected soon to propose ordinances that would allow those changes.

But those steps are not likely to sit well with many homeowner associations, which have worked to control development and to keep their neighborhoods as they are.

Much of the attention will be focused on the city's Planning Department, which will be charged with carrying out many of whatever policies the council decides on. In a report to the grants committee, the chief legislative analyst's office outlined actions the Planning Department could take.

The department could encourage "common wall" and "zero lot line" construction to make fuller use of each lot, ease zoning requirements, let builders use space over flood control channels, allow the division of large homes into apartments and permit homeowners to build rental units in their houses.

"These are exactly the kinds of things we need to be looking at," said Wachs, but he added his interest should not be taken as "carte blanche to change laws."

"We need to consider these carefully . . . but I feel very strongly that making better use of what we already have is our best hope."

The housing report outlines other possible measures as well, including clamping down on "the unnecessary abandonment or demolition of the current housing stock." Some developers are tearing down apartment buildings to put up condominiums, a practice which has stirred controversy at City Hall.

The department also could implement a program of continuous review and update of zoning and planning codes to enable builders to use the latest, most

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cost-efficient technology.

It could change parking requirements in some cases, demanding less parking space for senior citizens housing and for projects that are located near public transportation lines, for example.

It also could streamline the environmental report process, and even change street standards for new tracts to reduce land costs.

Community plans could be changed to reflect higher allowable densities, along with changes in zoning codes that would soften height limits and, in the hillside areas, would eliminate or relax slope density rules which restrict the amount of homes that can be built on a given site, the CLA's report said.

The report concludes by acknowledging that a desire to increase production must be balanced against good planning practices.

"However," the report adds, "if it appears that an imbalance unfavorable to housing development has developed due to circumstances within the control of the city, changes . . . may be desirable."

"In addition, many other powerful factors beyond the city's control, such as inflation and high interest rates, are exerting a strong negative effect on new construction.

"It is, in part, because of the existence of these factors that the city should place special emphasis on ensuring that its own role in housing is not adding to their negative effect if the greatest possible increase in housing production and supply under current conditions is to be achieved."