

Officials want affordable housing projects spread across Marin

By Nels Johnson
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County officials, promising to combat Marin's not-in-my-backyard culture as they promote "fair housing" for all, want to spread housing for the poor across Marin, rather than concentrating it in minority communities.

In addition, under an "impediments to fair housing" plan prompted by a dispute with the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, the poor, minorities, the disabled and women will get a bigger voice in how federal housing money is spent.

The plan, hammered out in 10 community meetings headed by Supervisor Judy Arnold, was lauded by many who attended a Civic Center hearing Tuesday. The county board adopted it on a 4-0 vote.

The goal is to turn the county into a more welcoming community for minorities, the disabled, women with families and others by easing some zoning restrictions, allowing low-income apartment complexes in suburban neighborhoods, boosting transit for the poor and eliminating discrimination.

Supervisor Kate Sears said she hopes the program spearheads a broader social justice initiative involving jobs, education and other issues. "Without the ability to get a job, housing remains merely an aspiration," she noted. "We've taken a small step here toward bending our way toward justice," she said, paraphrasing the late Martin Luther King Jr.

Supervisor Steve Kinsey called it a "blueprint for further change and engagement," adding, "we can't stop the status quo if we keep working the same way." Supervisor

Susan Adams asked for a periodic update on program results.

The plan is both a version of and a response to recommendations issued last spring by Fair Housing of Marin as part of a settlement with the federal government in which the county pledged to do more to help house the poor. The Fair Housing analysis was commissioned by the county after a damning report by HUD that concluded Marin had "failed to meet its fair housing obligation" in allocating \$3.5 million or more in annual block grant funding.

The plan approved Tuesday calls for a host of actions, including expanding a block grant committee to accommodate diversity and enabling the poor to have a say in the spending of funds that are supposed to benefit them. The program calls for streamlining or even "ministerial" review of affordable multifamily housing projects,

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allowing increased density, rezoning sites for high density housing by 2013, and adopting a housing chapter of the general plan in accord with the program.

The plan calls for outreach, data collection, financial literacy and translation programs and monitoring practices of landlords, among other things.

Supervisor Arnold lauded all involved in an exhaustive process to develop the program, saying consensus was reached among diverse groups even though some regarded each other with suspicion. Because 87 percent of housing sites are within cities, it is critical that municipal officials get on board or they will be in danger of losing their federal housing grant funding, she noted.

Arnold said the county administration has budgeted up to \$600,000 over the next five years to finance staffing, outreach and other costs of the program.

"I'm very encouraged," said John Young of the Marin Grassroots Leadership Network. Marin County Housing Authority chief Dan Nackerman called the program "very pragmatic, very do-able," and Nancy Kenyon of Fair Housing said her group looked forward "with great pride and hope."

"I am very heartened you are including protected classes in decision-making," said Andrew Bozeman of the Bozeman Development Group. "The way to solve a problem is to look at it and admit it's there. You've done that."

Arnold urged the diverse crowd to attend city council meetings at which housing issues are

discussed. "We don't see that much diversity there," she said of municipal meetings.

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