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NEWS

City unveils revamped affordable housing plan

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East Palo Alto is in the process of writing new guidelines for its affordable housing program that would give brownie points to residents who volunteer in the community and less emphasis on own-occupancy.

The new program was unveiled Tuesday during a City Council meeting.

The city's below market rate program, commonly referred to as the BMR program, was implemented in November 2000. Since then, more than 100 families have moved into affordable homes around the community and 64 low-income houses are in the works, according to city records.

City staffers spent the past two years examining ways to make the program better, said Mary Silverstein of the city's housing and community development department. The proposed system — currently being plugged as the Affordable Housing Construction Program — would give renters and homeowners equal opportunity to obtain a below market rate home in the city.

Lottery process

Housing developers are required to build a certain amount of affordable homes per project. Homeowners who fit the income and household criteria are given more leverage under the current system. Their names are placed on a list and picked by lottery.

City staffers are proposing that the city implement two lists, one for renters and one for residents looking to buy.

Additionally, residents who volunteer would be able to rack up points that would push their names up on the waiting list for an affordable house.

Staffers also suggested Tuesday night

more commercial advertising and working with local nonprofit groups to alert the community about available affordable homes.

Doing the best it can

The city's efforts have been widely praised by residents eager to see an end to the mid-Peninsula's housing crunch.

"I think they are doing the best they can in terms of affordable housing," said Robert Jones, director of East Palo Alto CAN DO, which helps residents find affordable homes. "To build affordable you need land and you need money."

The problem, Jones said, is the money factor, but the city is doing the best it can with the resources it has.

Silverstein said the city plans to do much more community outreach before the new guidelines would go into effect. Another study session is being planned for next month. If all goes well, Silverstein anticipates the new system could start by the first of the year.

Uproar on Baines Street

The new rules come at a time when the city is negotiating to purchase a three-bedroom below rate home on Baines Street. The city is hoping to turn around and sell the house in the University Square development to a local nonprofit group, possibly the Center for Domestic Violence or the Clara-Mateo Alliance.

Neighbors are in an uproar about the city's plans. They say they are worried about the "shady characters" that might move in and what this could mean to the predominantly owner-occupied neighborhood.

The \$133,500 deal is expected to close this month.