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Study: Little affordable housing means long commutes

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In traffic, it used to take Anelyn Gallego anywhere from two to three hours one way to drive from Fairfield, where she lived, to work in Corte Madera. She spent a year enduring the commute. Then in Sept. 2010, she and her daughter moved into a new affordable-housing complex located right down the street from her workplace. "Now I just walk," she said. "It takes two minutes."

Gallego said she wouldn't be able to afford living in Marin County, where she works as an office assistant to the local California Highway Patrol office in Corte Madera, if it weren't for affordable housing options. "I can't afford any other place," she said.

At her job, Gallego said she makes about \$2,000 net income per month. For a two-bedroom apartment at San Clemente Place, where she now lives with her daughter, Gallego said she pays about \$1,345 per month. Both she and her daughter contribute to the rent and are able to make it work, she said.

But Gallego got lucky, according to a new study released by Live Local Marin, a special initiative of the Non-Profit Housing Association of Northern California (NPH), an affordable-housing advocacy group, and Greenbelt Alliance, an environmental advocacy group.

Marin workers commute

The study found that Marin's workers live farther away from their workplace than anyone else in the Bay Area workforce. Although the county has managed to create a number of new retail and service positions, the market has remained too pricey for many of those workers to live in the county.

According to the study, only 1 in 9 Marin employees earning less than \$30,000 per year will find a home to rent in the county in his or her price range. On the other end of the spectrum, there is a surplus of rental choices for employees who can afford to pay up to \$2,000 per month.

"While traffic problems are nothing new," Dianne Spaulding, executive director of NPH, said in a prepared statement, "what we found is that, contrary to public belief, the traffic on 101 in Marin is not just due to people passing through, it is made up mostly of workers trying to get to their jobs in Marin.

"And, more importantly, more than half of these in-commuters earn less than \$40,000 per year. That's not enough to rent even a one-bedroom apartment in Marin. Is it any wonder they need to commute long distances? We're talking about workers like paramedics, kindergarten teachers and childcare workers."

The study found the problem lies in part with the ratio of affordable-housing units developed in the county versus housing priced for the wealthiest households. About 77 percent of houses constructed between 1999 and 2006 were priced for households earning \$80,000 or more per year, the study

contends. Only 11 percent of the county's workforce can afford housing at that price.

And the available affordable-housing units can be challenging to get, given the competition. During the year Gallego was commuting to Marin from Fairfield she applied to one affordable-housing development but her application was rejected. It was only because she kept trying that Gallego said she was able to finally move. She said she was desperate, and would often practice piano at her church in Novato after work just to avoid traffic. However, things changed dramatically with the move.

"I love it here now," she said.

Affordable housing hot-button issue

Affordable housing has been a hot-button issue lately, particularly in Novato, where state and regional officials have mandated planning for an additional 669 units of affordable housing — including 313 units of low-, very-low- and extremely-low-income units. The issue has attracted crowds of angry residents to city meetings for months now.

Marin state Assemblyman Jared Huffman is crafting legislation meant to change the way the state and regional authorities assign affordable-housing quotas to cities and counties. A few of those potential changes Huffman is weighing include getting communities more affordable-housing credit for such things as senior housing and conversion of foreclosed housing. He also hopes to promote sustainability and reduce greenhouse gas emission by giving communities more credit for establishing affordable-housing sites near transit.

Affordable-housing funds may also be on the chopping block as the state weighs whether to cut redevelopment funding, some of which is allocated for affordable housing.

Live Local Marin will be conducting a tour of affordable workforce housing for the public on March 5, 9 a.m. to 2 p.m., starting at 1385 North Hamilton Parkway in Novato.

Tim Omarzu contributed to this report.