

Affordable housing quotas working

Report gives an upbeat assessment of home ordinances

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More than half of all Peninsula cities have adopted ordinances that require a portion of new housing developments to be affordable, according to a report released Tuesday.

The report on inclusionary housing programs statewide, which also found that at least 80,000 Californians are living in long-term affordable housing, was an upbeat endorsement of affordable housing quotas.

In the uphill effort to produce new affordable homes in California, using inclusionary housing ordinances "is a solution that's actually working by putting roofs over people's heads," said Dianne Spaulding, executive director of the Non-Profit Housing Association of Northern California, one of four housing groups that authored the report.

"The next time you go to Macy's or Target to buy something or you go to the grocery store to get your food, ask yourself where the retail clerk might live and why they can't afford it," Spaulding said. "The people you think need affordable housing are the very people around you."

The report found that 170 jurisdictions in the state — 32 percent of cities and counties — now have some kind of inclusionary housing ordinance, up from 107 in 2003 and 67 in 1994. Palo Alto was the birthplace of the state's first inclusionary policy in 1973.

The ordinances vary widely in how they aim to achieve their common goal. Some require that as little as 6 percent of a housing development be affordable; others go as high as 35 percent. There are also a variety of incentives offered to developers, including the option to pay a fee or donate land instead of building the housing themselves; fast-track permit processes; fee waivers; and the ability to build at higher densities.

The challenge is still large — a recent report predicted San Mateo County will need more than 70,000 new housing units by 2025, more than half of those affordable to those with moderate incomes or below — but officials said the local ordinances are a start.

"I don't think anybody's claiming this is the sole solution to California's housing crisis or San Mateo County's housing needs," said Greg Richane, program organizer for the Housing Leadership Council of San Mateo County, "but it's certainly one tool among many."

Richane pointed to a project in Menlo Park, where a developer partnered with Habitat for Humanity to create 22 affordable homes as one of the products of such an ordinance.

The idea of "affordable" is relative, of course, but is defined in the report as housing that comprises no more than 30 percent of a household's total income. About 47 percent of the state's affordable housing was for low-income residents, defined as having incomes of \$61,312 for a family of four. Another 24 percent is for very-low-income families, with annual incomes below \$29,295; moderate-income families making \$98,128 annually comprised 21 percent.

San Bruno was cited as one of the eight top-producing jurisdictions statewide, requiring that 15 percent of developments larger than 10 units be affordable. Since it adopted its ordinance in 2003, it has issued 325 inclusionary housing permits, an average of 91 per year.

In San Mateo County, there are 11 cities plus the county that require some amount of affordable housing in certain new developments: Burlingame, Colma, East Palo Alto, Foster City, Half Moon Bay, Menlo Park, Millbrae, Portola Valley, San Bruno, San Carlos and San Mateo.

Other cities are building affordable housing but do not have citywide ordinances. Redwood City, for example, requires that 10 percent of developments in its downtown redevelopment area to be affordable to low-or moderate-income families, said Pat Webb, acting economic development manager for the city.

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