



SAN MATEO, SANTA CLARA & SAN BENITO COUNTIES

September 21, 2022

City of San Carlos
Members of the City Council and Planning Commission
600 Elm Street
San Carlos, CA 94070

Subject: San Carlos Housing 2040 Draft Housing Element

Dear Mayor McDowell and Members of the San Carlos City Council and Planning Commission,

The Sierra Club, Loma Prieta Chapter, Sustainable Land Use Committee advocates land use issues in San Mateo and Santa Clara Counties. Thank you for the opportunity to provide input on the 2040 Draft Housing Element.

The overall draft Housing Element (HE) is a very good start. However, there are specific areas that need further consideration to be sure that the final HE contains the key elements needed to make significant progress on addressing climate change mitigations and the enormous lack of affordable housing in the Bay Area.

The HE recognizes that the housing/jobs imbalance is a regional one and that each city needs to meet or exceed its goal if the housing crisis, particularly the lack of affordable housing, is to be solved. This is especially important in San Carlos where millions of square feet of commercial, R&D and Life Science developments are underway and in the pipeline.

Below are some additional actions that can be added to the HE to better assure that the goals for *climate adaptive* housing can be met.

Climate Change

No mention is made of how housing, particularly new housing, needs to be located (or avoided) in order to be resilient to and viable in the face of climate change. The risks of sea level rise (SLR) near the Bay and wildfires in the hilly and forested areas need to be factored into identifying viable areas for housing, including higher density and affordable housing.

With respect to sea level rise, we saw no discussion of how the city is planning its proposed changes to the housing zoning ordinances to adapt to any sea-level rise

scenario by 2050. As reported by KQED, "Models used in the state's latest sea level rise assessment from 2017, include an upper range defined in terms of statistically less probable events." [Maps, See Which Bay Area Locations Are at Risk From Risking Seas](#) They show the Bay could rise by as much as 1.9 feet by the year 2050 and 6.9 feet by the end of the century..." [Rising Seas in California: An Update on Sea Level Rise Science](#). The Housing Element should be evaluating the proposed development sites in light of impacts on the city of sea-level rise of 1.9 feet, including storm surges, and should describe how to mitigate that.

This is especially important for the sites proposed for up-zoning to RM-100 and developments that are already subject to periodic flooding from heavy rains and king tides. These sites include areas that have experienced repeated flooding for many years near Walgreens on El Camino and other streets near Pulgas, Belmont and Cordilleras creeks. San Mateo Daily Journal article on [San Carlos Flooding](#).

Conservation, Green Infrastructure and Open Space

Protect and improve San Carlos creeks as valuable habitats, green infrastructure and components of human and environmental health. Provide adequate creek setbacks in light of the greater anticipated storm events as well as sea level rise.

Modify Goal HOU-4.2, Zoning Ordinance Revisions, **to preserve or increase the current 25-foot creek setbacks**. The Draft HE proposes zoning changes that conflict with the creek set-back requirement. They read in part: *4) For residential only development, remove additional required setbacks (i.e., removing requirement to follow RM-59 zoning setbacks) in Mixed Use zones (resulting in no setbacks in most conditions) and 6) Remove side and rear yard setback requirements for mixed use and multi-family housing developments, specifically pertaining to portions of the building wall containing living rooms, primary rooms, sleeping rooms, and walls containing windows.* (Page 23.)

Remove from consideration the 2 - 3 properties currently proposed for up-zoning to RM-100 that sit directly on the banks of Pulgas Creek, including 1785 San Carlos avenue. See the list of properties on Appendix A. Four single family homes share a rear property line with 1785 San Carlos on the east end of Carmelita Drive. The property lines meet at the center of the creek. The entire block of homes has experienced many years of street, yard and garage flooding when the water level in the creek rises and submerges the storm drain outlet into the creek. Increasing density to r-100 on this site could be detrimental to public safety by exposing new residents to possible creek bank erosion, collapse and flooding.

Modify Goal HOU-4.2 Zoning Ordinance Revisions to strongly encourage the improvement of creek habitats for Pulgas Creek, Cordilleras Creek, Belmont Creek and any other creeks in San Carlos.

Add a goal to the Zoning Ordinance Revisions that specifically addresses hydrologic impacts. Ensure that improvements to creeks and other waterways do not cause adverse hydrologic impacts or significantly increase the volume or velocity of the subject creek. The priority should be to use nature-based improvements to reduce hydrologic impacts.

Add additional goals to the Zoning Ordinance Revisions that propose new Creekside development requirements. Require that new Creekside developments protect and improve setbacks, banks, and waterways adjacent to the development project in order to increase flood protection and enhance riparian vegetation and water quality. Use or restore natural features and ecosystem processes where feasible and appropriate as a preferred approach to the placement of hard Creekside and shoreline protection when implementing sea level rise adaptation strategies. Remove existing creek bank protective devices when the structure(s) requiring protection are redeveloped, or no longer require a protective device.

Open Space: Modify Goal HOU-4.2, Zoning Ordinance Revisions on page 23 that reads *(3) Remove minimum private open space requirement for residential in Mixed Use and Multi-unit zoning districts (retaining only the common/public open space requirement)*. We recommend preserving existing open space requirements to the extent possible, especially in ecologically important areas, such as Pulgas and other creeks and wetlands, such as the ones recently discovered at 806 Alameda de las Pulgas.

According to the US Environmental Protection Agency: *Well managed open space protects a community's natural green infrastructure, providing places for recreation, preserving important environmental and ecological functions and enhancing the quality of life*. Open space is particularly important in areas of high-quality habitat, corridors, stream buffers, and wetlands. [EPA Smart Growth and Open Space](#).

Setbacks From Single Family Homes

Goal HOU-4.2, Zoning Ordinance Revisions, removes almost all setback requirements. (Page 23.) Please include a stipulation that existing Transitional Standards for height and massing for lots bordering single family homes/zoning shall be retained.

City Planner Lisa Porrás recently confirmed in an email that: “Transitional Standards for RM sites are still in play and include/propose the following:

Development on RM Zoning sites have transitional standards when the RM lot is adjacent to a RS lot.

The height in RM 59 drops from 50 ft. to 30 ft. and 40 ft. based on distance of building to the RS lot. (this is what we have on the books today).

The height in RM 100 drops from 60 ft. to 40 ft. and 50 ft. depending on distance to RS lot. (RM 100 is all brand new).”

The proposed changes to the ordinance should be revised so that they do not conflict with the Transitional Standards for RM and RS sites and make clear that developments in RM-59 and RM100 zoning that border single family homes must provide at least the same transitional standards as currently exist. In addition, if a RM-100 development is 100% affordable housing, density increases to 150 du. On small or irregularly shaped lots, state mandatory height concessions could possibly exceed 8 stories. Therefore, RM-100 zoning should **not** be proposed for small or irregularly shaped lots that border single family homes.

Reconsider and Revise Proposed Housing Zoning Ordinance Changes to Increase Opportunities for Affordable Housing

We have considered other cities' zoning ordinances that include mechanisms that the city could utilize to better assure that more affordable housing will be built:

1. Do not upzone and give away any aspects of any revisions to the zoning code **by right**; but instead trade increased zoning density and benefits for significant community benefits - the topmost of which should be affordable housing. This can be done by establishing a base density below what is generally desired while instituting a local density bonus scheme which encourages zoning increases, and benefits above State density bonus law in exchange for substantial community benefits. This was an effective approach in Millbrae during Millbrae's review of the BART Station Area Plan.
2. Upzoning by right without any off-setting limitations will only increase the cost of land for both for-profit and non-profit developers which will translate into even more expensive housing in residential-zoned areas.
3. Do not establish specific maximum density limits for any multi-family residential project as planned, but instead let the density of each project be determined by objective design standards using a form-based code and vetting and approval of all community benefits proposed by the developer. This allows for a wider variety of unit types from micro-units and SROs to family and luxury units. It also allows for greater flexibility in determining the most valuable community benefits. (*Action HOU-4.2 implements Zoning Ordinance revisions which include not only an increase for higher density residential neighborhoods and mixed-use areas, but also will institute a new minimum density requirement (approximately 75 percent of maximum density) to ensure anticipated densities are achieved.* (Page 59, see tables on pages 23, 24)
4. Require all new office building and R&D developers to present a plan to the city indicating how the developer will aid the city in supporting the amount of new housing construction needed to house any net increase in new employees. This could be in the form of **substantial** financial set asides for new housing, or actually building enough new housing on or off-site, but the goal must be to strive for a reasonable jobs / housing balance within the city. It's important to link

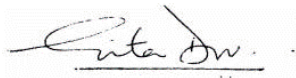
commercial development to the jobs/housing balance because, too often, cities accept in lieu fees or on or off-site new housing off-sets that are far too small to meet the anticipated need.

5. Add Transfer of Development Rights to the toolkit: Climate change is accelerating the displacement of people due to sea level rise flooding, wildfires, water availability, and extreme heat. Consider using Transfer of Development Rights similar to the Syufi Theater site, East of 101, in Redwood City to increase density in safer receiving locations like downtown and reclaim land from sending areas for creating restored ecosystem to buffer the force of flooding with landward migrating wetlands and to reduce the risk of wildfire with rehydrated landscapes. FEMA currently pays for sites damaged in disasters. Cities should work with FEMA to reduce future damage by planning for alternatives to developing in disaster zones.

6. Consider micro grids as a resilient Community Benefit: Climate change is increasing health impacts to vulnerable populations with smoke intensity, power safety shutdowns, and extreme heat and water cutbacks requiring alternative power and water. Consider encouraging housing that incorporates energy, waste, and water microgrids, that can provide resilient shared resources in the face of increasing health impacts and function within local distributed grids.

Thank you for considering our input.

Respectfully submitted,



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Cc:

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