

Viewpoint - Wednesday, February 20, 2013

Guest opinion: Proposed Stanford development would deepen housing deficit

by Adina Levin

Stanford's proposed new development on El Camino Real creates even more of a housing deficit for Menlo Park.

The city is now updating the housing element of its general plan after being out of compliance with state law for well over a decade. Because we have been out of compliance for so long, the city needs to identify many new properties that will be zoned for housing. The process is painful because Menlo Park is so far in arrears on identifying sites available for housing.

The housing element law addresses a problem in California — some areas have lots of jobs but few homes, and others have lots of homes but few jobs. This means that people commute long distances by car, which causes major infrastructure costs, pollution, health problems and contributes over 50 percent of the Bay Area's carbon footprint. Each jurisdiction with more than 1.5 jobs per household is required to identify sites for housing, and submit a housing element update every seven years showing compliance.

During the time that Menlo Park proceeded without a housing element, some other cities ignoring the law got sued and lost. The outcomes of losing a lawsuit have included a court takeover of local zoning and permitting decisions. Menlo Park is trying to avoid this by complying with the law.

Just as we seem to be getting our heads back above water on Menlo Park's housing deficit, the new development proposed by Stanford at 500 El Camino Real is putting us back under.

Stanford proposes a large mixed-use project with 230,000 square feet of office space and about 150 housing units. At 250 square feet per employee, a traditional rule of thumb, the project would generate 900 jobs, for a jobs-housing ratio of 6 to 1.

This is three times worse than Menlo Park's already job-heavy ratio of 1.9 jobs per home. The new development makes Menlo Park's "housing deficit" deeper.

Perhaps we can wait to see if other developers will create more housing in the area to bring us closer to balance? Menlo Park has recently adopted a specific plan with new zoning rules for the downtown/El Camino area, which could hold nearly 700 new housing units.

However, the only other large parcels in the specific plan area are 1300 El Camino Real, just north of downtown, and the Derry property next to the train station. Together they could add 196 residential units at the base zoning, and a maximum of 306 units using bonuses. Even assuming housing is proposed for these parcels, this is far short of the 700 units needed for the area to stay in balance.

In addition, the Midpeninsula office market is hot, especially near Caltrain stations, and Menlo Park is a desirable business address. Developers may well bring us more offices.

In other words, other locations in the specific plan won't get us out of the hole being dug by the Stanford proposal. What would be needed for the Stanford development to fix the balance?

If the proposed development cut the office space in half (down to 115,000 square feet), and replaced that space with more housing (about 234 units total), the jobs-housing balance would be improved to 2.0, in line with the specific plan. This is still a deficit, but at least it wouldn't dig the hole deeper.

The Stanford proposal needs to change: less office space, no high-traffic medical offices, and more housing. This outcome would generate far less traffic and would not worsen Menlo Park's housing deficit.

Adina Levin is a Menlo Park resident and Sierra Club member. Gita Dev, also of the Sierra Club, contributed to this article.

http://www.almanacnews.com/story.php?story_id=13782