

HOUSING PRODUCTION

# County, cities to tackle housing as regional problem

BY AMANDA BISHOP  
San Francisco Business Times Contributor

**H**ousing production has long trailed job creation in San Mateo County, and shows little sign of closing that gap. According to current projections, the county will build only half the housing it needs over the next two decades.

That's a prospect that business, government and housing leaders fear could threaten the economic health of the county and the future growth of its biotech and technology sectors.

"The county is bringing (in) many, many jobs, and we are not building housing for people — whether it's affordable housing or housing not labeled as affordable," said Tyler Hammer, executive administrator of Sustainable San Mateo, a group that advocates housing close to jobs. "The gap between what a family makes and needs to afford an average house is growing year after year."

Environmental leaders are also concerned that it's driving more sprawl into the Central Valley and elsewhere, requiring long, polluting commutes and eating up open space with suburban development.

There is limited land suitable for building. Huge swaths are off-limits because of open space protection, long distances to transportation lines or political opposition to new, dense housing in infill locations.

But housing leaders are beginning to think about the problems in new ways, by proposing that cities that are open to housing take up the slack for ones where it's politically unpalatable.

This is the beginning of a regional, rather than city-by-city, approach to this massive issue. San Mateo County's 21 jurisdictions are the first group in the state to submit a formal regional plan to meet state requirements.



Housing production must be dramatically stepped up, says Bay (left) with Supervisor Rose Jacobs Gibson.

**By the numbers**

San Mateo County's population will grow by 71,000 new households by 2025, but the county will issue only 36,000 permits for new homes, according to the San Mateo Housing Needs Study completed last month and commissioned by the City/County Association of Governments in San Mateo County, the County Department of Housing

and the Housing Endowment and Regional Trust.

As cited in Sustainable San Mateo County's April 2007 Indicators study, the Bay Area Council gave the county an "F" on its most recent housing production report card.

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The Association of Bay Area Governments reported that between 1999 and 2006, the county issued permits for only 16 percent of the housing units needed for moderate income households, 45 percent for low-income households and 19 percent for very low-income households.

Dan Crucey, executive director of the San Mateo Economic Development Association, said the problem is twofold.

"We are primarily concerned with availability and then affordability," Crucey said. "We have limited land to build developments. Where we do have land, the process to get it entitled to start construction is a long, drawn-out process."

Duane Bay, housing director for San Mateo County, acknowledged that housing production must be dramatically stepped up to meet demand. But he and other local officials think they have a solution for providing at least the 16,000 units that the Association of Bay Area Governments has determined are needed.

Instead of each city trying to meet 7-year goals set by ABAG and required by the state's "housing element" law, San Mateo County and cities within the county are joining together to come up with a regional housing plan. Cities and regions that do not meet their housing element are not forced to pay penalties but have limited eligibility for affordable housing funds.

"As a group of cities, we know each other more as neighbors and can agree to something that meets our needs but also meets state goals," Bay said. "It allows us to take advantage of local knowledge." Bigger cities, such as San

Mateo and Redwood City that have larger infrastructures and downtown plans calling for more housing have agreed to take on more housing than smaller cities.

"I think it's worked," said Richard Napier, executive director of the City/County Association of Governments. "The dialogue was very constructive among cities. There was no preconception of setting what one person's number should be." The cities will submit their plan by the end of August.

The cities are not only working together to plan for housing, they are also working together to see that it gets built.

**Many infill opportunities**

Just one large swath of undeveloped land, Bay Meadows in San Mateo, remains for housing. Developer Wilson Meany Sullivan plans 1,200 new housing units over the next two decades as part of a mixed-use development on the 83-acre site. But housing advocates say there are many infill opportunities in the county, especially along El Camino Real.

The county and city governments have joined to plan for the transformation of El Camino Real into a tree-lined Grand Boulevard with plenty of housing around train stations.

Transit oriented developments near El Camino have already proven to be a success, Napier said, pointing to Redwood City's 206-unit Franklin Street Apartments, the 218-unit Metropolitan apartments in San Mateo and San Bruno's the Crossing, which has 700 units built and 350 more in the pipeline.

There's plenty of room on El Camino to build 16,000 condominiums or apartments, Napier said.

"If we developed less than one-quarter



"No one can defend how long (Bay Meadows) took," says Meany.

of the length of El Camino Real at the rate of 40 units per acre or greater we could meet our regional housing allocation of 16,000 units," Napier said. "It says to me that it's possible."

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**Developers skeptical**

Chris Meany, a principal with Wilson Meany Sullivan, disagrees. He said El Camino Real is a good location for future county housing, particularly those patches of land near train stations, gro-

cery stories and parks, but he doubts that the El Camino will be any less controversial that elsewhere in the county.

Meany said the real barrier to developing housing in San Mateo County is affluence.

"People of affluence pay lip service — they might support environmental organizations, but affluent communities tend to fight development in their borders," Meany said.

Meany said he submitted an application to build 1,200 homes on Bay Meadows in 2000 and has yet to gain all necessary approvals. In the best-case scenario, construction will start on the homes in 2010.

"No one can defend how long it took and how expensive it will be," Meany said. "That's 120 units per year, with the entire focus of the City of San Mateo on that's the project to build in San Mateo. Compare that to (the time it takes to gain approvals) in the far East Bay where we all know we shouldn't be building."

Still, transit-oriented developments also have more and more advocates among the increasingly vocal environmental community, though that community for years fought any kind of development at all.

Melissa Hippard, director of the Loma Prieta chapter of the Sierra Club, said the organization is interested in the regional effort to create transit-oriented development along El Camino Real.

"We support the jobs-housing balance and transit-oriented developments," Hippard said. "We see more benefits to redeveloping urban spaces than endlessly building out onto green space at the perimeters of communities."