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Humboldt County Planning Commission

RE: Housing Element

Dear Commissioners:

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HUMBOLDT COUNTY
PLANNING DIVISION

As you deliberate the Housing Element (HE), Table 8-1 deserves your careful consideration. It may provide some of the most important information in the entire HE, so it behooves you to fully understand the implications of that information and your responsibility to respond.

Table 8-1 shows how well the current HE met the housing needs of various income levels in the unincorporated areas of the county. For above moderate income people, local builders and developers provided not only 100% of the projected need, but 189% and for moderate income people, 126%. There is certainly nothing wrong with having a surplus of those projected needs. However, for low income people, 78% of the projected need was constructed and for those living at the very-low income level, only 39%. Projected need for extremely low income people i.e. those making 30% or less of the local median income, was not addressed in the current HE.

What is the reality of these shortfalls? First, there is not enough housing for people who live in poverty and second, the competition for this limited housing excludes those who live in extreme poverty. Although it is theoretically possible that people living in poverty could one day purchase a house, the truth is that most poor people can only hope for rental housing. For a single person living at an extremely low income level, affordable monthly rent is \$270; for two people, \$309. Where can these people find a rental for \$300 a month?

In the extremely low income level are people living on SSI and disability and those who live with no income at all. Humboldt County's homeless population may be close to 2000. A recent count just inside the city limits of Arcata found 250 people living without shelter. Many of them live in third world conditions. They sleep rolled up in a tarp, under a building overhang, in an abandoned vehicle or building, in the forest, on the railroad tracks, in the bushes. They live without running water, without toilets, without any means of refrigerating or cooking food. They live in extreme poverty.

The Planning Commission must take very seriously the housing shortfalls for those who live in poverty. We need a variety of housing options—shelters, transitional housing, efficiencies, SROs, apartments of various sizes, duplexes, fourplexes, and whatever innovative and flexible strategies address the need. For poor families, we need lots of multi-family units that are truly affordable, i.e., do not require more than a third of their income.

Obviously local builders and developers have provided well for moderate and above-moderate income folks. They have not provided so well for the poor. The questions the Commission must ask of the contractors, developers and real estate people are: What can we do to help you provide housing for Humboldt's poor? We can provide the zoning, but what incentives do you need? What policies, standards, and implementation measures will encourage you to provide the variety of housing types and sizes that poor people need and for which they can pay? How much responsibility are you voluntarily willing to assume for meeting the housing targets for poor people? Are carrots sufficient? Do we need sticks?

I can't emphasize enough the significance of this issue. Poor people simply do not have access to housing because there isn't enough and there isn't the range of housing options they need and they cannot be competitive for what is available. The existing HE apparently lacked the mechanisms for ensuring that the free market would provide the needed housing for the poor. There must be something more we need to do to get that housing. I urge the Commission to figure out what that "something" is and see that it is part of the new Housing Element.

Thank you.

Sincerely yours,


Susie Van Kirk