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## GUEST OPINION

### First Rule for City Planners: Do No Harm

By Paul Hernadi

Even during times of rising unemployment, it is easier to find a job in Santa Barbara than it is to find affordable housing. This explains why our jobs/housing imbalance is a chronic disease with no cure in sight. But there exist commonsense remedies, about which more below, and many of us wonder why city officials and planning staff seem to prefer investing time and money in the futile search for miracle drugs with potentially harmful side effects.

The most recent public exercise in such futility occurred on June 24 and 25. The community was invited to attend two workshops about the “financial feasibility of developing buildings with more compact units targeted to middle income/workforce households.” The presentations were, I believe, disappointing for most attendees.

Deploying an arsenal of graphs and figures, the expert consultants concluded that private developers need to have a 15% profit margin on their investment and, therefore, should be allowed to put 62 dwelling units on every acre of land if they are to subsidize housing for 6 moderate and 18 middle-income families. This was the gist of Scenario 4, but the three rival scenarios contemplated were promising even less affordable housing and threatening even more severe blows to our current jobs/housing imbalance.

The prospect of 62 dwelling units per acre both downtown and in the Upper State Street area raises disturbing questions:

- Does Santa Barbara's scarcity of water, road capacity, and other resources really allow almost tripling the highest residential density currently permitted in the affected zones?
- Could the resulting tall and bulky buildings eclipse much of our architectural heritage and many of our panoramic mountain views?
- Wouldn't the residents of the proposed 38 market-rate units and the residents of the 18 subsidized middle and upper-middle income units create demand for many more service jobs than the number of workers accommodated in the 6 moderate-income households?
- Last but not least, what about the many teachers, nurses, fire fighters, police officers, and other professionals who are not among the lucky winners of future lotteries for subsidized middle income housing? Wouldn't most such "losers," if they stay in their current positions or fill newly available jobs, spend long commuting hours on the highway?

The overarching question is, of course: Why should Santa Barbara, with its small-town charm and metropolitan culture, gradually turn into Orange County North if most proposed "cures" would only worsen the "disease" -- our jobs/housing imbalance accompanied by proportional decrease in the city's economic diversity.

Given the worldwide demand for real estate in and around Santa Barbara, the expense of owning or renting a place of residence here will remain way above the national average for the foreseeable future. By contrast, our average salaries and wages diverge much less from their counterparts in other parts of the country. Hence we must stop dreaming about “curing” the city’s jobs/housing imbalance and get serious about such remedial treatments as the following:

- Promote or even require **employer supported rental and ownership housing**. This would enlarge our stock of affordable housing without adding job-generating luxury units to the mix, and also assist employers in recruitment and retention.
- Persuade voters to approve **bond issues for producing a significant amount of affordable workforce housing**, some of which could enable middle-income nurses and public safety workers to reside near their jobs.
- **Make long commutes less detrimental to the environment** through increased support for alternative transportation by bus, train, van pools, and ride-sharing.
- Adopt a **dual density policy** in appropriate commercial and multi-family zones to curb the production of large luxury units and to stimulate the production of housing that is affordable either by law or by design. For example, the Variable Density Ordinance could be modified by providing a 10% density bonus for three-bedroom units under 1,000 square feet, with one- and two-bedroom units having somewhat lower size thresholds. By contrast, units over 1,000 square feet should be held to the city’s traditional density

limit of 12 units per acre. Such a balancing act would increase the availability of affordable housing without increasing the total number of permitted units even if, as is required by law, the current state and city bonus density allowances for subsidized affordable and inclusionary units were added to the new dual density standards outlined above.

Most ideas expressed in this article are shared by many people. I have compiled them here in the hope of prompting further dialogue before several of us present them and similar ones to Planning Commission on July 23rd. The meeting starts at 12 p.m. in the David Gebhard Public Meeting Room (630 Garden Street). With sufficient turn-out by believers in pragmatic approaches to land use planning, that day may just turn out to be a turning point in the city's deliberations about its future.

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