Anti-Nimby Tools

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Historically, local governments have had broad discretion in the approval of residential development. However, local parochialism and prejudices often result in policies and practices that exclude the development of affordable housing, thereby exacerbating patterns of racial and economic segregation and creating a substantial imbalance of jobs and housing. In recent years, several laws have been adopted that place important limitations and obligations on local decision-makers in the area of affordable housing.

Housing Element Law (Gov. Code Sec. 65580 et seq.) Every city and county must adopt a housing element as part of its general plan. Most importantly, a housing element must identify sites appropriate for affordable housing and address governmental constraints to development. If the locality fails to adopt a housing element or adopts one that is inadequate, a court can order the locality to halt development until an adequate element is adopted or order approval of specific affordable housing developments.

In most cases, the identification of sites must include sites zoned for multi-family development by right. Section 65583.2 (AB 2348) requires the element to specifically identify sites and demonstrate their availability without restrictive zoning burdens. See our Housing Element Fact Sheet for additional detail.

"Anti-Nimby" Law (Gov. Code Sec. 65589.5). Even in communities with valid housing elements, local governments often deny approval of good developments. Misinformation and prejudice can generate fierce opposition to proposed projects. Recognizing this, state law prohibits a local agency from disapproving a low income housing development, or imposing conditions that make the development infeasible, unless it finds that one of five narrow conditions exist. Of the five, three are of most import: 1) the project would have an unavoidable impact on health and safety which cannot be mitigated; 2) there is no need for the project; or 3) the project is inconsistent with the general plan and the housing element is in compliance with state law. SB 948 (Alarcon) (Chapter 968, Statutes of 1999): (1) narrowed the definition of what constitutes an impact on health and safety; (2) applied the law to middle income housing; and (3) clarified the authority of courts to order localities to approve illegally denied projects. AB 369 (Dutra) (Chapter 237, Statutes of 2001) provided attorneys fees and costs against localities that violate the law. SB 619 (Ducheny) (Chapter 793, Statutes of 2003) expanded the law to mixed use developments. SB 575 (Torlakson) (Chapter 601, Statutes of 2005 narrowed the "no need" and "zoning inconsistency" conditions for turning down affordable housing.

Prohibition of Discrimination Against Affordable Housing (Gov. Code Sec. 65008). This statute forbids discrimination against affordable housing developments, developers or potential residents by local agencies when carrying out their planning and zoning powers. Agencies are prohibited not only from exercising bias based on race, sex, age or religion, but from discriminating against developments because the development is subsidized or occupancy will include low or moderate income persons. Local governments may not impose different requirements on affordable developments than those imposed on non-assisted projects. Just as with the other state and federal fair housing laws (see below), this law applies even if the discrimination is not intentional. It applies to any land use action that has a disproportionate impact on assisted developments or the potential minority or low income occupants. SB 619 (Ducheny) (Chapter 793, Statutes of 2003) prohibited

discrimination against multi-family housing.

California and Federal Fair Housing Laws. These laws prohibit discrimination by local government and individuals based on race, color, religion, sex, familial status, marital status, national origin, ancestry or mental or physical disability. The California Fair Employment and Housing Act (Gov. Code Sec. 12900 et seq.) expressly prohibits discrimination through public or private land use practices and decisions that make housing opportunities unavailable. Similarly, the federal Fair Housing Act (42 U.S.C. Sec. 3601 et seq., or "Title VIII") has been held to prohibit public and private land use practices and decisions that have a disparate impact on the protected groups. The federal Fair Housing Amendments Act of 1988 requires local governments considering housing projects for the disabled to make reasonable accommodations in rules, policies and practices if necessary to afford disabled persons equal opportunity for housing (42 U.S.C. Sec. 3604(f)(3)(B)).

Water/Sewer Service (Gov Code Sec. 65589.7). Local water and sewer districts must grant priority for service hook-ups to projects that help meet the community's fair share housing need.

Density Bonus Law (Gov Code Sec. 65915-16). Local governments must grant projects with a prescribed minimum percentage of affordable units up to a 35% increase in density and up to 3 incentives. An incentive can include a reduction in development, parking or design standards, modification of zoning requirements or direct financial aid. See our Fact Sheet on Density Bonuses for additional detail on new laws.

Permit Streamlining Act (Gov Code Sec. 65920 et seq.) This law requires localities to publish a description of the information that project applicants must file and mandates a time-line for making a decision on the application. If the local government fails to act within the prescribed time limits, a development project is "deemed" approved. SB 948 (Alarcon) (Chapter 968, Statutes of 1999) reduced the time period for action on affordable housing applications from 180 days to 90 days.

Bonds/Attorney Fees in NIMBY Lawsuits. A court may require persons suing to halt affordable housing projects to post a bond (Code of Civil Procedure Sec. 529.2) and to pay attorney fees (Gov. Code Sec. 65914). SB 619 (Ducheny)(Chapter 793, Statutes of 2003) permits nonprofit project proponents to intervene and collect attorneys fees in such suits.

CEQA Exemption. In 2002, the Legislature replaced Pub Res Code Sec. 21080.14 (100 unit exemption for affordable housing in urbanized areas, provided the site is less than 5 acres, not a wildlife habitat and is assessed for toxic contaminants, etc) and Section 21080.10 (45 unit exemption for farmworker housing) with a new "infill" exemption that also combines the former exemptions. SB 1925 (Sher) enacted Pub Res Code Sections 21159.22-25, and provided additional qualifications for those exemptions in Sections 21159.20 and 21159.21. Importantly, SB 1925 eliminated the discretion of localities to deny the exemption based on "unusual circumstances".

Multi-Family Moratoria. In order to circumvent Anti-Nimby law, some communities have adopted moratoria on all multifamily housing. SB 1098 (Alarcon), (Chapter 939, Statutes of 2001) amended Gov Code Sec 65858 to prohibit the exten-sion of a multifamily moratorium beyond 45 days unless the locality makes written findings that the development of multifamily housing would have a specific, adverse impact upon public health or safety.

Conditional Use Permits. Most commercial, industrial and single-family residential uses do not require a conditional use permit, but many communities require a conditional use permit for multifamily housing. SB 619 (Ducheny)(Chapter 793, Statutes of 2003) prohibits conditional use permits on multifamily housing developments that meet the CEQA affordable housing, farmworker or infill exemption, and on affordable multifamily housing with 100 or fewer units, a density of at least 12 units/acre, located on an infill site in an urbanized area, consistent with the zoning and general plan, and has a neg dec or mitigated neg dec. In 2005, SB 326 (Dunn) (Chapter 598, Statutes of 2005) expanded this law to apply to attached duplexes, triplexes and fourplexes as well as multifamily housing.