

Marin County Supervisors Will Soon Reveal Their Regard For Marin's Traditional Character

By Sharon Rushton



Tamal Vista Apartments at the WinCup Site in Corte Madera by the Marin Post

Last month, the Marin County Planning Commission rejected a proposed County Development Code amendment designed by the Supervisors to lower the density of sites designated with the "Affordable Housing Combining District" (AH District) zone from 30 units per acre to 20 units per acre, as allowed by a new state law (AB 1537) embraced by the Supervisors. On July 21st the Supervisors will take up where the Commission left off and decide the fate of the proposal.

The AH District currently applies to portions of three sites in Unincorporated Marin: two sites identified in the 2015 to 2023 Marin County Housing Element, the St. Vincent's / Silveira site and the Drake Ave. site in Marin City, and, in addition, the Golden Gate Seminary site in Strawberry.

Remember Assembly Bill 1537 that Mark Levine and the Supervisors fought so hard for? The bill lowered the default density for housing sites identified for lower

income households in Marin County's Housing Element from the "Metropolitan" density of 30 units per acre to the "Suburban" density of 20 units per acre. **If the Supervisors agree with the Planning Commission's decision, then any benefit from AB 1537 would be killed.** By not lowering the density at the housing element sites identified in the 2015 to 2023 Housing Element, the sites remain zoned for the Metropolitan density of 30 units per acre.

Yet, the Supervisors' directive to Staff and the Planning Commission to lower the density at the sites would NOT have lowered the number of units allowed to be built at the sites. **"What?"** The draft amendment proposed to lower the density to 20 units per acre and at the same time INCREASE the number of acres where the units could be built, thus keeping the potential number of units that could be built at the sites, the same number.

This makes us scratch our heads and wonder... Do the Supervisors truly want to lower potential density of affordable housing to 20 units per acre to keep Marin's traditional character and lower potential adverse environmental impacts from high-density housing?

Moreover, as originally written, the AH District was designed to only apply to sites identified in a Housing Element. The Golden Gate Seminary site was removed from the Site Inventory of the 2015 to 2023 Marin County Housing Element and therefore, the AH District should no longer apply to the site. Yet, the County is now changing the rules to extend the reach of the high-density AH District and apply the designation to the Seminary site too.

If the County and the Supervisors truly want to maintain Marin's traditional character and lower potential adverse environmental impacts from high-density housing, then, at minimum, they should lower the density of the AH District from 30 units to 20 units per acre and NOT increase the area of the sites where the AH District is applied. Moreover, by lowering the density at Housing Element sites, Marin County would be able to show the California State Department of Housing and Community Development (HCD) that the County can provide affordable housing at lower densities. Such a history would help Marin County officials renew Assembly Bill 1537 when it expires. They should then make similar changes to all the other County zoning that allows for more than 20 units per acre.

It is questionable whether or not 20 units per acre is low enough to qualify for the traditional semi rural character of most of Marin County. All concerned should remember that if the State Density Bonus were applied to a site, then the applicable residential density would be increased by up to 35%. As such, the Density Bonus could increase 30 units per acre to 40 units per acre (equal to the density of the Tamal Vista Apartments at the WinCup site) and increase 20 units per acre to 27 units per acre.

We will soon learn the Supervisors' thoughts regarding this matter.

The Marin County Board of Supervisors will hold a public hearing regarding the Development Code Amendment for the Affordable Housing Combining District on Tuesday, July 21st at 1:30 pm at the Civic Center. Please send comments beforehand to the Board of Supervisors - bos@marincounty.org

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