

Density to rise in National City

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National City, already the most densely populated city in San Diego County, is expected to become more so by 2021.

City Council members accepted a report April 16 from staff on its housing element, a state-mandated strategy that assesses current and future housing needs.

The current proposal covers an eight-year planning period through April 30, 2021, and assesses constraints, establishes goals, policies and programs.

State housing law requires each city and county take its share of regional housing needs to accommodate growth during the planning period. It is allocated by each region's metropolitan planning organization, which locally is the San Diego Association of Governments, or SANDAG.

SANDAG has prepared a Regional Housing Needs Assessment that allocates 1,863 housing units for all income levels to National City.

National City faces high regional housing costs, low household incomes and the limited availability of undeveloped, vacant land. It is the most dense and diverse city with the lowest household income in San Diego County.

Community Development Executive Director Brad Raulston said the information is meant to be used as a planning target and is intended to ensure cities provide proper zoning for housing.

Raulston said without funding such as redevelopment money, which was eliminated by Gov. Jerry Brown, it becomes more difficult for the city to build.

"From a planning side we can accommodate it but from an implementation side it's going to be a challenge," he said.

Councilwoman Alejandra Sotelo-Solis said she's concerned about balancing the need for housing with the increase for other services.

"The General Plan is the document that attempts to balance those issues," Raulston said. "As far as service levels, when you increase your population you increase your tax base and meet your service needs, but of course there's great challenges especially when you layer sustainability over everything."

"New housing creates impact and you have to be able to mitigate that. It's not a perfect balance ever."

Carolina Martinez, a policy advocate with the Environmental Health Coalition, suggested increasing the percentage of affordable housing for residents at the low end of the income spectrum.

“Eighty percent of families in National City are at the low, very low and extremely low income level,” she said. “Right now only 44 percent would be dedicated to meeting those needs. We’d like to request that that number be increased to 60 percent.”

Martinez added that affordable housing is a way for low income residents to move toward homeownership.

Sites suitable for residential development are based on land use and zoning regulations, development standards and other factors.

The city’s higher density residential and mixed-use development zones provide the greatest potential for the production of affordable housing because economies of scale can be realized to reduce the costs of construction, according to the staff report.

“This is your land use constitution and generally you would comprehensively update it every 10 years,” Raulston said to council members. “I don’t know everyone who’s doing it (across the county) every 10 years because it’s become such a long and expensive process.”

National City Mayor Ron Morrison said the city has done its part to maintain the housing standard.

“We’ve actually met our numbers and built the houses,” Morrison said. “We’ve done all these different things on large scales that other cities won’t touch. I think we’ve done a great job and we’re going to continue to do a great job.”

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