

Housing Element Debate Moving On To City Council

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It's moving on up.

On Tuesday, the City Council conducted a study session in regards to the 2013-2021 Housing Element, a document that will pave the way for future housing concerns and development.

Before that, the Planning Commission officially approved the document last Thursday, Dec. 5, although commissioners said they expected it to be further tweaked and modified before final City Council approval.

“I want you to know that we have heard every word you’ve said, at least I have,” Commissioner Mark Christoffells said during Thursday’s meeting, referring to a large number of public speakers on the topic who were not yet satisfied.

The Housing Element is a state-mandated general plan that must be updated periodically. The State Department of Housing and Community Development (HCD) must review the document for compliance with applicable state statutory requirements.

Housing Element components are to include assessment of current and future housing needs, inventory and analysis of residential sites, reviews and analysis of constraints on the production of housing, housing programs to address the housing needs identified and quantified objectives for development/rehabilitation/conservation of housing over the time period.

The Regional Housing Needs Assessment (RHNA) gives cities a number of housing units — Long Beach’s is 7,048 units for this next Housing Element. That unit number is split into different income brackets. In essence, the document as a whole must figure out how to accommodate the RHNA units required for the city. That doesn’t mean they must be built, it just must be available for the possibility. The document also will include a Housing Plan, which is supposed to work toward conserving and improving existing affordable housing, providing adequate sites for the new housing, assisting in the development of affordable housing, removing governmental constraints to housing development and promoting equal housing opportunities for Long Beach’s populations.

With some minor amendments, the Planning Commission passed the document unanimously. Although the first year of the document is marked for this year, there is a 121-day grace period that city officials now must aim for — it must be passed cleanly by Feb. 12, 2014. Officials said a first vote in City Council likely would be slated for January.

“There are a lot of programs from previous elements and some have been updated,” Housing Operations Officer Patrick Ure said Monday. “We offer quite a variety of programs to help the homeless community and those in need. We feel very comfortable with this document. I think the fact that the Planning Commission adopted it on Thursday speaks highly on it as well.”

HCD notes included topics like first right of refusal for displaced lower income, zoning for special needs housing (emergency shelters), transit oriented development for lower incomes and commitment on housing funds for lower income.

Many of the public speakers were led by the coalition between Housing Long Beach and the Legal Aid Foundation. Those groups and their coalition have been vocal about the need to address low income housing needs as much as possible.

“You need money or policies, but we have neither in Long Beach,” said Kerry Gallagher, executive director of Housing Long Beach. “It really is at this point in the hands of the council.”

Gallagher said she was happy that the city was looking to explore a Rent Escrow Account Program, which addresses substandard properties already in existence. On the other hand, on Thursday there was debate about how quickly that could get going — the Housing Element has a timeline that wouldn’t implement anything before the Planning Commission until 2016. Gallagher said she believes that can happen more quickly since there are similar laws in comparable cities.

Her group also vows to fight for a mixed-income housing ordinance (ties a percentage of housing to affordable housing) and for the city to use some of its Boomerang Funds — property tax money coming to the city in lieu of the defunct Redevelopment Agency — toward affordable housing.

During the Planning Commission meeting, officials said a mixed-housing ordinance might be tricky due to litigation playing out during the next year. As far as Boomerang Funds — the City Council did not set aside any money for affordable housing this year. In a survey of 22 jurisdictions, 16 have no plans using that funding that way and five had not decided — only Los Angeles County was using some of the money toward that, Director of Developmental Services Amy Bodek said at the meeting. Planning Commission members said they would defer to how the council chooses to use that money.

As far as affordable housing, Ure said the city is trying to do as much as it can.

“Everyone forgets how much we already do,” he said, citing a positive example. “If you look at our Housing Authority, it provides about 7,000 vouchers that help lower income and extremely lower income households pay their rent.”