Housing Long Beach Outlines Priorities For Upcoming Housing Element Of City’s General Plan

By Samantha Mehlinger
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Housing Long Beach (HLB) is advocating priorities to be included in the city’s updated Housing Element draft, which is being reviewed by the city’s planning commission and released to the public June 20. The non-profit HLB pushes for affordable housing development in Long Beach, citing Southern California Association of Governments’ (SCAG) estimate that the city must create 4,009 affordable units of housing by 2021 to meet the needs of residents.

At a May 8 press meeting, HLB released a report about housing issues in Long Beach pertaining to the Housing Element. According to the document, 47 percent of residents in Long Beach pay more than 35 percent of their income on rent. Affordable housing, as defined by the federal government, should cost no more than 30 percent of a person’s income.

Kerry Gallagher, executive director of HLB, says the organization has been in talks with city staff about the priorities for the element, as well as the drafting and approval process. They also successfully pushed for three community meetings prior to the draft’s release.

Statistics provided by HLB show that 20,000 families in Long Beach live in overcrowded conditions, a symptom of low housing inventory and unaffordability. According to the report, residents face de-facto segregation and health problems, which inhibit educational and childhood development.

Data maps in the 2008-2014 Housing Element illustrate that the majority of low-income earners and minority residents live in the west side of Long Beach, with higher income non-minorities on the east side. HLB notes that the 90815 zip code in East Long Beach has an average life expectancy of 83 years, while the downtown 90802 zip code has a life expectancy of 76 years.

“Mixed-income housing allows lower income people to have access to quality community resources that many middle income families currently have in Long Beach,” Gallagher emphasizes. In
mixed-income housing, a percentage of units would be allotted for housing for those with very low, low, and moderate incomes.

Gallagher says these developments ideally would have access to “healthy community resources” like public transit and parks. She explains previous sites identified by the city “aren’t realistic or aren’t healthy;” such as areas “along the 710 freeway, which is the toxic death zone, or along Ocean Boulevard,” where land is too expensive.

HLB also advocates “permanent, local sources of funding.” Boomerang funds, which are funds taken from the closure of the city’s redevelopment agency (RDA) and returned to the city, are one option. She explains that “twenty percent of RDA funds were legally allotted to affordable housing development,” and concludes the same amount should be allocated toward that goal. Commercial linkage fees, which charge commercial establishments a fee per square foot of development and allocate those funds to affordable housing, are also an option.

The crux is how to ensure rates remain affordable over time. Gallagher explains HLB’s solution: “The type of affordable housing that we’re promoting has what’s called an affordability covenant,” which ensures residents only pay 30 percent of their income to rent.

SCAG estimated 5,440 new very low to moderate-income level units were needed within the City of Long Beach for the period of 2008 to 2014. According to planning commission documents from May 2, only 571 of those were created. The documents state this number is skewed because some units do not meet state requirements for rehabilitation. Gallagher estimates only 550 affordable units were created.

“Ultimately our advocacy is aimed at elected and appointed officials,” she says. HLB’s goal in its campaign is to get city officials to “recognize that housing is one of the central components that impact families’ lives and community health.”

While HLB’s concerns are being considered by city staff, Gallagher says, “What we’ve been told is at this point they haven’t included anything new.” Her current understanding is that the element will remain the same as the current version.

Some changes will be made, according to Robert Zur Schmiede, deputy director of Long Beach Development Services’ Housing and Community Improvement Bureau. One example he provides pertains to Senate Bill 2, which he says “requires the zoning by right for homeless shelters.”

Zur Schmiede explains that once the document goes through planning commission’s June 20 study session, it will enter a public commentary period and will be submitted to the state’s housing and community development department. “There may be revisions that come out of that;” he notes. He estimates the document will come back to the planning commission in August and go to city council for approval by October.