

Affordable housing advocates issue report with 'aggressive' solutions

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LONG BEACH -- Tongratha Veng works four different jobs and still can't afford a place of his own. The Cambodian immigrant shares a living room in a house, and must deal with people coming and going, interrupting his sleep and reducing his quality of life.

Stephanie Lee, who runs the New City Charter School in Long Beach, tells of a kindergartner who was suicidal because of his living situation. With help he and his family were able to find a more stable situation and he has since developed into a star student.

The two narratives demonstrate how affordable housing alone can have far-reaching effects in the lives of residents, officials with Housing Long Beach said Wednesday.

The nonprofit group, which advocates for affordable housing, released a 10-page report Wednesday detailing the history of housing in Long Beach and outlining ideas for improvement. They said the time is right to seriously address the problem.

As the city government has ramped up the process of producing the upcoming Housing Element for its General Plan, a number of community groups have weighed in with their visions for future development of housing in the city.

The city is required by the Southern California Association of Governments to show it has appropriate sites to build 4,009 affordable units by 2021. Of course, Long Beach was also required in the most recent housing element to come up with 5,440 units, but "didn't even come close to that," according to Susanne Browne, a senior attorney with the Legal Aid Foundation of Los Angeles and affordable housing advocate.

Kerry Gallagher, executive director of Housing Long Beach, said the housing element is a road map for addressing housing needs and as such is vital to the future of the city.

She added that a variety of circumstances have come together to provide a "unique opportunity" for a meaningful document to be drafted. These include increased awareness and community activity supporting affordable housing and the dissolution of redevelopment funds, which for years were the city's main source for affordable housing funding. The loss of that money, she says, will force city leaders to examine new ways to meet mandates to provide equitable housing for all residents.

Browne said she has noticed a shift in attitude among city planners and leaders that leads her to believe change is possible.

"We have heard a narrative and dialogue change," she said.

The housing element is a written plan required for all cities and counties by the state and must be updated every eight years. Long Beach has been staging required public hearings as part of the updating process for the document, which will be in place from 2014-2021.

The document is meant to be a kind of blueprint for development and addressing of housing needs in the city. As such, it is required to analyze myriad issues, including housing production needs, existing stock, affordability, segregation, fair housing, preservation of at-risk units and sites for future housing development.

To Housing Long Beach, a core issue is including aggressive measures to bring Long Beach not only closer to compliance with regulations, but to do what is morally correct.

"We need to be a more equitable city," said Dennis Rockway, a long-time community activist.

To reach these goals, Housing Long Beach is among several groups in the city that promotes housing policies to

ensure greater access to reasonable housing conditions for low-income residents.

Among its proposals are mixed-income housing proposals for new apartment and condominium developments that would set aside units for low-income residents, creation of permanent local affordable housing funding, measures that require owners who rent out substandard housing to provide upgrades and identifying suitable and healthy sites for housing development.

The final draft of the housing element is scheduled to be completed in September with a City Council vote in October. A preliminary draft of the element will come out for public review June 7.

Browne says the battle to provide reasonable living situations for all is not easy, but it is vital to a society.

"If we leave the majority of our residents behind, how will we succeed?" Browne asked.

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