



## Housing Conference Issues and Perspectives

by Dao Doan

When I was asked to volunteer on the Ventura County Housing Conference Organizing Committee some 12 years ago to represent both my firm, Mainstreet Architects, and the Ventura County Civic Alliance (of which I was a Chair and am now a member of the Executive Committee), I was hoping that I wouldn't be there very long. I had wished to work myself out of that position, for I thought at some point the conferences would end if their objectives had been met. What's the point of the conferences if there is no longer any issue with housing, or so I naively thought.

In prior conferences, the messages were pretty consistent and clear: yearly data showed that housing supply fell far short of the demand. At the time, shortage numbers in the 30,000 units were presented, with a projected County population in the early 1960's General Plan of a maximum 1.5 Million by about 1984. It is now still only about 850,000. Yet as years went by, housing needs kept growing at a faster pace than the County was able to produce units. This created a supply-demand imbalance that contributed to an artificial housing cost inflation which put homes further out of reach of people of various income levels. Despite valiant efforts by local public housing agencies and other non-profit, affordable housing developers, thus far they have not been able to create enough affordable housing units to close the gap.

Hence, I formulate a mental mission to bring to the conferences open dialogues exploring the reasons that cause such shortages and how can we address them. Perceptions vary depending on each person's perspectives. In general though, they revolve around the following major issues:

- The emotional hurdle, or often referred to as NIMBYISM (Not In My Backyard): many oppose building all the housing units needed based on the perceived threat of "urbanization" of areas. They like to point to villainous examples: Los Angeles and the San Fernando Valley. They react negatively at the mere mention of proposed housing units.
- The political hurdle: both elected and appointed City leadership naturally responds to the high pressure from the vocal minority that shows up at council meetings to loudly express their opposition to projects of various scales, even if they often do not understand all the fine nuances of community or building designs.
- The psychological hurdle (closely related to the two above): At about the same time the Housing Conferences started taking shape, the SOAR (Save Open Space and Agricultural Resources) initiative passed in most of the County. This initiative restricts developments outside of the boundaries of the areas already "urbanized" to preserve farmlands and open space. This is not an unworthy cause. However, there have been no provisions to allow increased density within the "urbanized" area to make up for the loss of the ability to build more needed housing units. Many people perceive density as "bad" (where



“those people” live), and they refer to LA or the Valley as examples they do not want to emulate in the County. Such sentiments are often expressed without any explanation as to why it is “bad” or what they mean as “bad.” Often people confuse overcrowding with density and lump the two together without any differentiation. Intermingled with all that are more complex and controversial issues of race, gender, age, etc.

This year saw the 15th conference. 15 years later, I couldn’t help asking myself, what has happened? Many of the take away messages from the various speakers and local planners were similar to the ones before. The issues:

- As long as NIMBYISM remains strong, efforts to meet housing demand will be an uphill challenge. Everyone concerned should step up and attend city council meetings to voice support of deserving projects, rather than leave it all to the naysayers.
- While development demands certainty, local politics can be baffling to those not familiar with the area. This discourages even savvy developers from proposing projects in the County.
- Many consider Ventura County a “paradise,” but culturally and geographically it is fairly isolated. It is not always “in sync” with concepts explored in neighboring communities such as LA or San Fernando Valley where density is better tolerated. Change is not an operative word here. The outside world has to conform to the County, not the other way around.
- The Federal tax deduction for the housing mortgage is the biggest subsidy to all homeowners and adds to the artificial housing shortage as well as to an imbalance between rental and ownership units. Homeowners perceive that additional housing units lower the value of their own properties, which have reached artificial highs thanks to the artificially created shortage. Thus a never ending vicious cycle is created. Talk of removing the deduction has been around for years with no sign of any progress.
- Lack of political courage from government leadership to push the housing agenda.
- Sadly, in the last 10 years, 11,000 units have been entitled and permitted, but not built. There are several examples of sites readily available for higher density mixed use type housing, such as the still vacant old “Top Hat” site in downtown Ventura, which would add considerably to the community.
- The big recession has further dampened development activities, whereas before it, developers just said yes and hoped to figure out how to make it work later. All the added time has made many projects no longer viable.
- It is too easy to sue a project; even after years of processing have gone by and a project has been approved, it can be brought to court. The CEQA process encourages this approach.



The presenters and panels suggested a number of potential solutions, many of which have been brought up before, to no avail:

- We have control of our destiny for better or worse.

- People should engage in housing advocacy, just like the old saying goes, “it is up to us.”
- Be for something (not against something). One example: BARF - Bay Area Rental Federation in San Francisco is for something: we need housing!
- Turn to positive spin for affordable housing.
- Engaging policy makers directly may help. For 5 to 7 member City Councils, try to educate at least 3 to 4 people. Work with them to have the courage to have good policy.
- Good design is important; we should pay attention to those affected most by the projects.
- Early outreach to people is encouraged.
- Density is more easily embraced by Millennials, so perhaps we should concentrate some efforts in that market. Furthermore, density facilitates public transit.



Inaction has its own risks:

- Community cannot remain static. It is either getting better or getting worse.
- With the current housing cost situation, if we exceed the renters' ability to pay rent, we get overcrowding.
- If housing costs gets out of control, we may have another bubble in the future.



With all this sobering information, I found myself again wishing that the community professional and political leaders would arrive at some solutions sooner rather than later and that, sometime very soon, we can stop having the housing conference altogether, or at least not have to rehash the same issues year after year. What will next year find us talking about?