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Cover article on Town Hall, that continues on page 13A And Editorial on Page 26 A

Laird, Addis blame Sacramento for housing mandates

By Mary Schley

LEGISLATORS IN Sacramento who represent large urban areas are driving the housing mandates and pro-development laws being decried by public officials and residents in small cities like Carmel-by-the-Sea, State Sen. John Laird and Assemblywoman Dawn Addis said during a talk hosted by the Carmel Residents Association and moderated by Pine Cone publisher Paul Miller Monday night. And that's unlikely to change anytime soon.

"There's a question of 'What are people thinking in Sacramento?'" Laird said in his opening remarks, but the state is "3 million under meeting the demand," for housing, people's children can't afford to live in their hometowns, and the "rank and file" can't find homes where they work.

'Apply to all cities'

And since small communities aren't tackling those problems on their own, they need to be addressed at the state level, according to Laird. He acknowledged, however, that many of the housing bills that eliminate or drastically curtail the powers of the California Environmental Quality Act, the Coastal Act and local governments in order to facilitate high-density development were authored by legislators from places like San Francisco, Los Angeles and San Diego, "and yet they apply to all cities."

(as continued on page 13)

"My experience as a small-town council member is cities don't build housing," observed Addis, especially when redevelopment funds aren't available.

She and Laird raised the issue of Sacramento's one-size-fits-all political mentality. Addis said she did not support SB 423, which in part streamlines the process for development but doesn't require affordable housing in complexes with nine or fewer units.

“It was very important that if the state was going to allow any streamlining and local governments give up control, we get something back for that,” she said.

‘Why Not?’

While state environmental and coastal laws have strangled development along the coast and exacerbated the housing shortage, Addis said eliminating them could have parts of California looking like Malibu.

State bills allowing widespread “by right” development are not the answer, according to Laird, but “if you let cities and counties decide, and we are 3 million short and not much is being built, that is not going to deal with the political forces in Sacramento that are guiding some of this.”

Addis also acknowledged that building in coastal areas is problematic because of environmental factors, flood and fire risks and other issues.

Miller asked why large, developable, open areas in the former Fort Ord aren’t used for housing instead of cities like Carmel and communities like Carmel Valley, where the water is short, fire hazards are high, property is expensive, and space is scarce.

“Why not sponsor a law that says the housing mandate for Carmel is lifted and being transferred to Fort Ord?” Miller asked.

Neither answered that call, but Laird said he holds the “controversial point of view” that the state’s regional housing needs allocations — which resulted in the mandate that Carmel-by-the-Sea determine how to accommodate 349 new units within its 1 square mile — don’t work in smaller communities.

‘Not realistic’

“The regional housing needs system is not going to work over time, because I think the cities and counties have been assigned more housing units than what’s realistic,” he said. In his district, which contains 21 cities, only two — Morgan Hill and Gilroy — have come close to adding enough housing.

The Peninsula’s perpetual water shortage also hampers development, and Miller asked what could be done about it. Laird responded that “everyone has to give up a little and make sure there’s a sustainable water supply for the whole county.”

“Right now, everybody wants to do what they want to do,” he said, adding that he would support a small desalination plant to provide water for Marina.

“To me, water means putting everything on the table,” Addis said, calling for state and federal funding to help communities resolve their water-supply problems so they can build more residences.

She advocated for the same collaboration to deal with housing issues and finding ways for future generations to “build wealth.”

“It’s the responsibility for all of us in this room to think about, where are our kids and our grandkids going to live?” she said. “We can’t stay stuck in this us-vs.-them, state-vs.-local, me-vs.-you mentality.”

Editorial

The tyranny of the majority

By Paul Miller, Owner, Publisher, and Editor

SHOULD PEOPLE who live in big cities be able to dictate policy for small towns? In a representative democracy like the United States, things frequently turn out that way. In presidential elections, for example, the candidate preferred in New York, Los Angeles and Chicago almost always wins, no matter what people in Topeka, Tupelo and Tulare want. For some national issues – things where the costs and benefits of any given policy are equally distributed around the country – the electoral advantage given to city residents makes sense, because there are more of them.

But what about issues that are uniquely rural or that only affect people in small towns? Should those be decided by big city residents, too?

The classic example is the 1996 California ballot measure to decide whether it should be legal to hunt mountain lions, which are much more common than they were 50 years ago.

According to the California Department of Fish and Wildlife, from the beginning of the 20th century until 1963, a bounty was offered for anyone who killed a mountain lion, reducing the statewide population of the big cats to about 1,500. But things changed in 1990 when a ballot measure reclassified the mountain lion, reducing the statewide population of the big cats to about 1,500. But things changed in 1990 when a ballot measure reclassified the

mountain lion as a protected species, making it possible to kill one only if it was a demonstrated threat to farm animals — a policy that restored the lion population to its pre-1900 level of 4,000 to 6,000. As the lion population boomed, so did impacts on livestock, pets and even humans.

“Public support for the big cats began to wane with a series of attacks on humans, culminating with two fatalities in 1994,” reported the Los Angeles Times.

The threat convinced the Legislature to schedule a 1996 ballot measure that would have made it legal, once again, for ranchers to kill mountain lions that preyed on their herds, and for hunters to kill them for sport. But when the issue went before voters in March 1996, the result was 58 percent to 42 percent in favor of maintaining the lions’ protected status. In cities like Los Angeles, San Francisco and San Diego, the pro-lion vote was overwhelming, reaching as high as 75 percent, while in rural areas like Modoc, Inyo, Madera and Plumas counties, the vote was as high as 80 percent to allow people to hunt lions.

Should it matter that there are no lions in San Francisco and nobody who lives there has a herd of sheep or is afraid they’ll be mauled by one while they’re on a neighborhood hike? Should people who have no stake in the outcome be allowed to decide an important political controversy for people who do?

This question came to mind during Monday night’s forum on statewide housing mandates that were imposed by politicians in big cities but will have their biggest impact in small towns. Sen. John Laird and Assemblymember Dawn Addis acknowledged that forcing built-out Carmel to add 349 housing units will have a major impact on the town, which until five minutes ago was considered an historic village of statewide significance. But they also said there was no chance of getting the mandates lifted or amended, because big-city residents are determined to have them.

Since the beginning of zoning, land uses were considered matters of local concern, to be decided by city councils and boards of supervisors, because the impact of housing policies was felt by local residents much more than people who lived elsewhere. This is still true. But in California, the people of San Francisco and Los Angeles have become so arrogant and so politically extreme, they think they should be deciding everything for everybody. And the people of Carmel, population 3,200, are way too few to do anything about it.

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