

Dense housing can win support

Views shift as people become more informed, study shows

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When a team of Stanford University researchers polled a random sampling of 238 San Mateo County residents about the local housing crisis, the general response was: "What housing crisis?"

Just 38 percent believed there was a need for more housing in the area.

On its face, the finding confirms what might appear obvious at any public meeting on a major development, from San Mateo's Bay Meadows to Redwood City's Peninsula Park: The people who live here aren't eager to welcome new neighbors.

But the research team, commissioned by a nonprofit called Threshold 2008 and led by Stanford professor Jim Fishkin, wasn't finished with its respondents. After polling them, the participants were each paid \$200 to attend an intensive two-day seminar on housing issues at Canada College and then surveyed again.

This time, in findings published last week, 68 percent said they'd support building more housing in the county. The majority said the new homes should be densely concentrated in already developed areas, even if it means taller buildings in their neighborhoods.

That, said organizers, should serve as a more

powerful argument than anything uttered by the smattering of naysayers at a typical planning commission meeting.

"What it shows is that if you give people a chance to think about the issue and get informed, they come to the conclusion it's something we really need to address," said Threshold 2008 director Greg Greenway, a former businessman and housing advocate.

That's what happened for Stephanie Haynes, an IT specialist from San Mateo who was picked to participate.

"I think going in I had fragmented thoughts," Haynes said. "I want to save open space; I don't want a lot of traffic; I want people to be able to live close to where they work. I had all these thoughts, but I hadn't tied it together."

Over the course of the panels and discussions, Haynes said, she began to understand the trade-offs involved. If more housing isn't built, prices will continue to rise and middle-class workers will move farther away, clogging the freeways with even longer commutes. If more housing is built, it means either a loss of open space or higher densities in already developed areas.

Like the majority of her fellow respondents, Haynes eventually decided that transit-oriented infill developments are probably the least of the possible evils. As a result, she said, she is beginning to feel more comfortable with the idea of

1,200 new units rising from the site of the Bay Meadows Race Track near her house.

"The housing has to go somewhere," Haynes said. "If the trade-off is not having people take away agricultural land in Half Moon Bay, then maybe

it's not such a bad option."

Fishkin, who has run dozens of similar "deliberative polls" around the world, said it's quite common for people's opinions on a complex issue to change as they learn more facts. For that reason, he maintains they can be a more useful guide to policymakers than conventional polls.

In fact, Fishkin said, several of his past polls led directly to major political changes when the results were shared with officials.

In Texas, a 1998 deliberative poll on energy issues spurred that state to invest in wind power; it now leads the nation in wind energy production. In Rome, a forum on a health care budget shortfall led to reducing the number of hospital beds to preserve other services — a choice that was unpopular in conventional polls but supported by those who attended the seminar.

"Basically it gave the politicians cover to do the right thing," Fishkin said.

Could the deliberative poll on housing bring about similarly striking changes here in San Mateo County?

Assemblyman Gene Mullin, D-South San Francisco, who spoke on one of the expert panels, isn't certain. After all, he said, "that's generally been the conventional wisdom, that as people learn more about the effects of inadequate housing, they tend to become more supportive" of new developments.

While it's helpful to have data to back up that perception, Mullin added, "it's tough for a planning commissioner when you have five or six residents talking to you on one side, and a piece of paper on the other side."

But director Greenway said the deliberative poll is

just the beginning for Threshold 2008.

His group is now presenting the results to city managers and officials across the county. Next will come an online discussion on housing in which anyone can participate. Then a series of "community conversations" in May and June in which trained moderators replicate the seminar experience for civic groups, such as neighborhood associations and religious congregations.

As for what action comes after all that talk, it's still up in the air.

"We're hoping the answer will reveal itself based on what people are saying," Greenway said.

Registration for the online dialogues will begin in April. For more information, visit threshold1510.org.

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