



Chang grilled over housing

Oakland councilmember signals accord with mayor, activists

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OAKLAND — Community activists put City Councilmember Henry Chang on the hotseat Monday night with tough questions on his views on affordable housing.

By and large, they liked the answers they got.

Chang, the council's only at-large member, indicated he would be willing to support housing policies not too different from those offered by Mayor Ron Dellums and Councilmember Jane Brunner (North Oakland), both of whom have drawn praise from organizations that want more affordable housing in Oakland.

It was the latest sign that councilmembers on opposite sides of the issue may be nearing a compromise.

Chang said it was a priority of his to ensure working families in Oakland, such as people living on a teacher's salary, have a place to live in the city.

"The only way they can stay, and they want to stay, is (for the city) to find ways to create more affordable housing," he said. "That's really key."

Chang was joined in the event, organized by the Oakland Community Organizations and ACORN, by Councilmember Jean Quan (Montclair-Laurel), but it was Chang's stance on the affordable housing issue that drew the most intense questioning.

Chang has been on the other side of the issue from Quan, whose views are closer to those advocated by housing activists. Chang cast a vote against a proposal in 2006 that would have forced developers to build more affordable units and, later that same year, supported a proposal to allow more apartment-to-condominium conversions.

Neither proposal garnered enough votes. More than a year later the council is grappling with the same issues. Chang won over many of the roughly 300 who filled the pews at Imani Community Church, but not before he stumbled in an ill-fated attempt at humor.

Chang's question-and-answer period followed testimony from three speakers, all involved in ACORN, about the need for housing.

One woman, Linnie Cobb, read a statement from Cornell Doss, an East Oakland renter who could not attend because of a work conflict. The statement described shootings and drug dealing in Doss' neighborhood and everything from plumbing problems to mold to rodent infestations in his apartment complex.

Chang, who grew up in China during the World War II era, responded by saying that in poor Asian countries, rat infestations can be considered a good thing — because rats mean there's food in the house.

"When you tell people, you say, 'I found rats in my house,' they should say, 'Wow! Congratulations. You're lucky,'" he said.

An audible groan rose in the church. Chang recovered quickly.

He said he would support an increase in spending on housing for low-income families by contributing

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35 percent of the city's redevelopment money to such programs; he said he'd support a plan to force developers to make at least 15 percent of their projects affordable, a concept called inclusionary zoning; he said he'd support a cap of 200 apartment-to-condo conversions every year, unless the number of affordable units built under an inclusionary zoning surpassed that mark. There are key differences between Chang's position and the positions Dellums and Brunner are pushing.

For example, both Brunner and the mayor say any inclusionary zoning policy should include rental units. Chang said he would not support covering rental development at this time.

Still, the Rev. Valerie Miles-Tribble, an Oakland Community Organizations leader, said Chang's support for inclusionary zoning and a cap on condo conversions represented a "major victory" for housing activists.

"I think there will probably be, we have to be realistic, there will probably be some compromise on the exact points," she said, "but the major pieces we're trying to get ... we will work to make sure they're there."

The council last took up affordable housing at a Feb. 19 meeting, where members took no action but said they were close to reaching a deal. Quan said it is imperative the council move quickly, before city elections in June and before budget deliberations that will force Oakland to cut as much as \$35 million out of its 2008-09 spending plan. Five seats on the council, including Chang's, are up for grabs in June voting.

"This is a key time," Quan said, "because we have so much in play right now and there's so much community activism. ... It's not just elections."

We're going to have a really tough budget year. I'm worried if we don't get this done, we're going to be bogged down with the budget the rest of the year."

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