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Advocates want guarantees for affordable housing on weapons station land

Goal is that 45 percent of all housing on base be affordable

By Tanya Rose
Contra Costa Times
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CONCORD — In part because of the foreclosure crisis, and partly because it's their job to do it, housing advocates are asking Concord leaders to plan now for affordable housing on the shuttered Concord Naval Weapons Station base.

The City Council will likely consider in November two proposals for developing the former military base's 5,028 inland acres, but they are general. Both lay out how much of the land will go toward open space and how much will go toward development, and where most of that development would be. But as for the specific type of housing to go there — that's a decision for later, city leaders have said.

Amie Fishman of East Bay Housing Organizations, working as part of the Community Coalition for a Sustainable Concord, says her organization wants to see 45 percent of all housing on the base be "affordable," geared toward families making \$20,000 to \$86,000. And she argues that the earlier such a figure is set in stone, the better for future residents.

"We need to see what the guarantees are going to be, so we know the community benefits will be realized," she said. "It has to happen at the same time (as the general planning); you can't have one without the other."

"The majority of housing on the base can't be these mega-mansions that no one can afford," Fishman added. "We need to learn the lessons of the foreclosure crisis and stop pricing homes beyond peoples' needs and ability to pay."

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city leaders say determining housing specifics now is like picking out wall colors before the foundation is built. The two development alternatives call for 10,040 to 11,950 residential units, but that's as detailed as plans are.

"We're still dealing with figuring out which areas on the base should be developed at all," said Councilwoman Laura Hoffmeister. "And then within that area, we need to know what the arrangement will be — residential versus commercial and so on. We're still looking at the big picture and then we'll get into what type of housing — things like how dense, detached versus attached, one story or two."

She pointed out that the city has only until January to forward a "preferred" land-use plan to the Navy, and to take up time discussing housing details wouldn't be the best use of resources. Also, Hoffmeister said the definition of "affordable" may be different 15 or more years from now, when the base will likely see its first development.

"We'll get to the concept of affordability once we get a land-use plan everyone agrees on," Hoffmeister said. "It's like when we say, 'We're thinking about putting a park here' and then someone says 'Will there be a soccer field on it or a softball field?' and we're like, 'Sorry folks, we're just not there yet.'"

Both Fishman and Mike Daley of the nonprofit EAH Housing say Concord is on the right track with the general planning, and Daley says the city staff has been great about meeting with him and his peers. He said he believes there will be a larger demand for rentals in light of the mortgage crisis. He also said there needs to be more education about what affordable housing means — no one is interested in building ghettos, he said.

"There's some really beautiful affordable housing out there that is integrated in with all other housing, and most of the time people can't even tell by looking at it," he said.

"Up until a year ago, new houses were costing \$700,000 and \$800,000, so when we say 'affordable,' we're talking about something that most people in Concord would look at and say 'Oh, that's my price range,' and then we'd also have some lower than that, for very-low income people."

There are also plans in the works to accommodate the homeless. The federal government requires homeless housing, whether it's a shelter or transitional housing or other programs, as part of all its base closures. The city is in the process of negotiating with advocates.

The next City Council meeting on the base takes place Nov. 17.

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