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Standing Room Only for State of the City Meeting

By Cathy Tyson

Although mayor Mike Anderson kicked off his state of the city address discussing major concerns for Lafayette - fire department and emergency services, what to do about the old library, and traffic - the main focus of the evening, and the subject of much of the question and answer portion of the Lafayette Homeowners Council annual public meeting, was Plan Bay Area and Regional Housing Needs Assessment (RHNA) numbers. Anderson and vice mayor Don Tatzin gave an informative overview of what both items are and how the city is meeting mandated requirements.

At several points during the meeting it became clear that there is a distinction between what the city of Lafayette is responsible for and can be acted upon and other topics and mandates handed down by the state of California, which citizens sometimes blame on volunteer city leaders.

"The biggest issue we've got is emergency services," said Anderson. He explained that there's a task force working on determining what is the best course of action for the city to be better served and a clear goal of "not subsidizing (other municipalities), so we get what we pay for."

Traffic congestion is also a hot topic, since the city is constrained by its topography. With a year-to-date 23 percent increase in home values and a median price of over \$1.1 million, Anderson believes these figures demonstrate that people want to move to Lafayette. Currently the Circulation Commission is working on a detailed study of downtown congestion.

The mayor introduced Plan Bay Area by saying that what happens at the state level affects counties and cities in California. In this case, Senate Bill 375, the Sustainable Communities and Climate Protection Act of 2008, "supports the State's climate action goals to reduce greenhouse gas emissions through coordinated transportation and land use planning with the goal of more sustainable communities," according to the California Environmental Protection Agency Air Resources Board.

"It gets complicated," said Anderson of the Sustainable Communities Strategy and meeting the mandate of RHNA numbers, basically a matrix of potential housing that allows development that could accommodate low-income residents should the land owner decide to do so. "We can't not do this," he explained; all California cities must be in compliance.

Using population projections that are part of baseline assumptions, municipalities are required to address the state mandate - for Lafayette that means accommodating Housing Element potential for growth in the downtown area. By doing so, the mayor explained, this allows for priority conservation areas, open space that should be set aside and not developed, leaving semi-rural areas like Happy Valley and Burton Valley.

Questions ranged from an opinion that the Downtown Specific Plan is flawed, encouragement to have robust fire protection locally, perception of "ugly" structures being built, to crowding on BART and in schools. Anderson calmly explained that the city doesn't run BART or the school district, and the public is always welcome at meetings to comment on the attractiveness or concerns regarding potential development, and that they are diligently working to resolve the fire and emergency service situation.

Subsidized housing came up; one person stated there is no reason to use Lafayette's resources to bring in subsidized housing and "bring in people who can't afford to live here." The mayor replied that all of the development going on downtown is not subsidized by the city with the exception of the Eden housing development which will provide 47 units for low-income local senior citizens.

The current surge in construction downtown is a concern of many residents. Lafayette's General Plan controls development, along with an extensive review process for all structures, said the mayor, making it clear that a Priority Development Area doesn't override that process. PDAs are eligible for capital infrastructure funds.

"People have an economic interest in developing their property," said Anderson, adding those interests have nothing to do with the PDA or Plan Bay Area. "Building is going to happen regardless;" having the PDA and obtaining grants will help keep the downtown functional. "We can't tell someone they can't build on their property."

President of the Lafayette Homeowners Council and longtime resident Jenny Kallio was pleased with the large turnout and described the meeting as constructive, bringing awareness to citizens and complimenting the mayor on how he explained these volatile issues. In her opinion, the City Council is "doing its best to contain development." She added that information on current and future construction projects is available on the city website for "all the world to see." Go to www.lovelafayette.com for information.

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