

Jessica Lynch

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Sent: Thursday, May 20, 2021 5:38 PM
To: Jessica Lynch
Subject: Comments on the Housing Element Update

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Hi,

I'm writing to comment on the Housing Element Update. I grew up in Davis and graduated from Davis Senior High School in 2013. I am now an Assistant Professor of Economics at the University of Florida. I visit Davis often in the summer, and I would like to eventually move back to Davis. However, for the time being, that goal seems infeasible due to Davis' high housing prices.

I am glad to see that Davis is taking the time to thoughtfully update its housing plan. However, I am dismayed by the content of the proposed plan. The proposed plan does not deal with the regulatory issues that make housing in Davis unaffordable. Namely, the proposed plan continues to ban duplexes and apartment buildings in most of Davis. It also maintains parking minimums, and it does not allow for mid-rise buildings at strip malls. Finally, it doesn't do anything to streamline approvals or to limit frivolous appeals and lawsuits. This complacency and lack of action is unacceptable amid California's housing crisis.

In general, government should intervene in the market to address market failures---that is, to protect the environment, combat inequality, deal with monopolies, etc. By contrast, the exclusionary housing restrictions that exist in Davis involve intervening in the market to make outcomes worse. They harm the environment by incentivizing usage of private automobiles and by pushing development to other towns and states, where it is likely to be less well planned. They reinforce inequality by making Davis unaffordable for all but the richest families. They also make Davis less livable by devoting space to wide roads and expansive parking lots, rather than allowing dense, walkable communities, with easy access to parks and retail.

Davis has long prided itself as being forward-looking. As part of that, it has led the country in developing bicycle infrastructure and in relying on solar and other forms of renewable energy. However, with regard to lifting exclusionary housing restrictions, we are well behind the pack. Berkeley, Sacramento, and Oakland have all recently lifted restrictions. The town where I currently live (Gainesville, Florida) has far fewer restrictions than Davis. In many ways, this makes Gainesville a nicer place to live than Davis. It has the same benefits of being a university town with progressive and well-meaning residents. However, it has more housing (including far more mid-rise apartment buildings) and lower housing prices. This allows Gainesville to be more economically diverse than Davis and to have more young families. In addition, it is rapidly working to make the town more bike- and pedestrian-friendly.

The argument against building denser housing is that doing so will increase traffic. This is an unfortunate consequence of the fact that, in the 20th Century, California decided to rely on private automobiles for transportation, rather than develop an efficient train system. It cannot be said forcefully enough that traffic is an illegitimate reason to restrict housing. This is because there is an alternative strategy. Namely, we can use the revenue from up-zoning to invest in alternatives to driving. There are a number of things that Davis can do to reduce driving. Some of these are easy and immediate, while others are long-term projects. In the short run, Davis can build more bike access into downtown, such as by adding a stoplight at 3rd and L Street. It can also add an online payment system for Unitrans. Over the longer run, Davis should pressure the state government to electrify the Capitol Corridor and to prioritize passenger trains over freight traffic. In addition, Davis should look into building a regional train. This train could do a loop connecting Woodland, Davis, West Sacramento, and Sacramento. It would have three stops in Davis: one in North Davis by the Cannery, one in downtown, and one at the commuter lot by Mace Blvd. It could also have multiple stops in Woodland,

including one near the new research park. Finally, the train could include a shuttle service to the Sacramento airport. Importantly, the right of way for this train already exists, as can be easily seen on Google Maps. While it's true that the costs of a train would be steep, the benefits would be transformative. The train would connect the region and allow dense development, while reducing traffic, carbon emissions, and smog. The train will prove particularly useful as Sacramento builds out the Railyards site adjacent to its current downtown.

In sum, the draft housing element is an unacceptable document. It tries to limit housing in the hopes of avoiding traffic. A much better strategy would be to encourage housing and to combat traffic by developing transit. The solution to the housing crisis is to think big, not to pray that it will go away.

Sincerely,
Robert Ainsworth