

Davis' Cannery project falls short for low-income residents – it's not worthy of your approval

By: Greg Sparks, Executive Director at the Sacramento Housing Alliance

Called “a model for developments” by the *Sacramento Bee* Editorial Board, the Cannery promises to be an environmentally-sustainable infill project that includes restaurants and work buildings among its 547 housing units. While the Cannery is innovative and exciting in many respects, including its community garden and options for net-zero living, it does not reflect a commitment to low-income residents, who largely support Davis' service economy. The Cannery is a project affected by recent changes made to the city's Affordable Housing Ordinance.

The City of Davis had a groundbreaking Affordable Housing Ordinance that required developers to include a percentage of affordable housing within new projects. This prevented segregation and opened up affordable housing options as the community grew. In July, this ordinance changed. Revisions approved by the City Council allowed developers to build unregulated accessory units, 400-600 foot spaces, as part of their affordable housing obligation. Called “affordable by design” by some, this label is misleading. The mere fact that these units are small does not guarantee that they will be affordable—especially in a new development. In addition to being potentially unaffordable, accessory units are not practical for low-income families, who simply cannot live comfortably in such a small space.

Revisions to the Affordable Housing Ordinance now allow every two accessory units to count toward one affordable housing unit that is required, not to exceed 50% of the total affordable housing obligation. The Cannery is proposing 40 accessory units, which means that the city of Davis may be cheated out of 20 truly affordable housing units.

The Cannery is just one project that could be affected by the false promise of the “affordable by design” model. The ordinance has been changed to allow for these units. The only way to ensure that new developments in Davis will accommodate low-income residents is to add a provision to the Housing Element—the legally-enforceable plan for housing. They should test whether accessory units actually house low-income residents upon occupancy in 2016. If few to no low-income residents actually occupy these units, the Affordable Housing Ordinance should eliminate the affordability by design option.

The Cannery in Davis should not price out the low-income workers from its community. More than this, the City of Davis should consider this group's needs when planning for housing. Local government is the gatekeeper of just and equitable policies for its residents. Can the Davis Mayor and City Council live up to this obligation?

Author Bio: Greg Sparks is an affordable housing professional with 18 years of experience in the Sacramento area. Before becoming the Executive Director of the Sacramento Housing Alliance, he worked for Mercy Housing and the Rural California Housing Corporation.