

Local advocates survey solutions to affordable-housing crisis

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Bruce Barton/Town Crier Joe Simitian, from left, Mary Prochnow, Leslye Corsiglia and Julie Mahowald discuss the affordable-housing issue, with a backdrop of the interior of an affordable-housing project.

Titled "The Invisible Housing Crisis in Los Altos: Win-Win Solutions," the Nov. 15 event at Silicon Valley Community Foundation headquarters in Mountain View offered insights from a panel of affordable-housing advocates and community leaders, including Los Altos Mayor Mary Prochnow, Santa Clara County Supervisor Joe Simitian, SV@Home Executive Director Leslye Corsiglia and Los Altos resident Julie Mahowald, chief financial officer of Housing Trust Silicon Valley.

Defining the problem

Before a sizable crowd, advocates offered personal stories to illustrate that the lack of housing is a systemic issue, resulting in long commutes, unhappy employees and endless traffic congestion.

"I have come to the conclusion that I cannot buy a house in the Bay Area," said Sharif Etman, administrative services director for the city of Los Altos.

Etman, who lives in San Jose, said he cut down his 17-mile morning commute to Los Altos from 85 minutes to 35 minutes by riding a motorcycle. He noted that only three of the city's 130 employees live in town, and most face long commutes.

Sam Oden, executive director of The Terraces at Los Altos retirement community, shared similar observations. Oden said the vast majority of Terraces employees "don't live anywhere near Los Altos."

Given the commutes, Oden related that the temptation is always there for employees to leave and find jobs closer to home.

Prochnow, a realtor, recently sold a single-family home in Los Altos that was listed at \$2.825 million and sold for \$3.42 million.

“Most people hear that story and say, ‘Gee, that must make you really happy.’ Doesn’t make me happy at all,” she said. “We’ve gotten better about cultural diversity, but we’ve gotten worse about economic diversity.”

Los Altos has a state-mandated Regional Housing Needs Allocation goal of 477 affordable units by 2023. Its current inventory is 210 units, but 184 of those are in the “above moderate income” range (“moderate” is defined as \$135,950 annually for a family of four).

Los Altos has only 20 “low income” (\$84,900) and four “very low income” (\$59,700) units. The city has no “extremely low income” (\$35,800) units, with a goal of 84 by 2023.

Prochnow noted that the inventory challenges are compounded by the challenges of overcoming people’s prejudices. She had one resident tell her, “We can’t provide housing for people who can’t take care of themselves.”

She proudly pointed to four units on First Street that are occupied by teachers taking advantage of affordable housing programs.

“You’re not building blight,” Prochnow said. “People say, ‘We want good retail. We want good restaurants. We want a lot of activity downtown.’ Who’s going to work in the restaurants? Who’s going to work in the stores?”

“This is a conversation we’ve not just had year after year, but for decades,” Simitian said.

Simitian kept revisiting the phrase “Get the balance right,” pointing to addressing the demand as well as the supply problem.

“Every ecosystem has a limit to its carrying capacity,” he said. “Building more and more housing while we’re creating more and more jobs that require more and more housing is what got us here over the past 25 years.”

Solutions

Simitian offered what he called three “hard but simple” solutions: land, money and community will.

Simitian pointed to success stories like Measure A, the \$950 million countywide housing bond voters approved last November. He said \$800 million of the \$950 million will serve people in the “very low” or “extremely low” income brackets.

Resources

Mahowald explained how Housing Trust Silicon Valley makes loans and offers grants to affordable-housing developers and first-time homebuyers, including people emerging from homelessness.

She called Housing Trust a “prolific lender in the Bay Area,” serving 13 counties, including Monterey.

The Trust has created the TECH (Technology + Equity + Community + Housing) Fund, with the goal of raising \$50 million in lending capital to support creating and preserving 10,000 affordable homes. Cisco Systems Inc. and the Sobrato Family and David and Lucile Packard foundations have contributed \$20 million thus far.

Corsiglia said SV@Home provides research, statistics and education to help elected officials “in making tough decisions” with regard to affordable-housing project proposals.

Her group is supportive of accessory dwelling units, often called “granny units,” as an important option in areas dominated by single-family homes.

Prochnow said she favors such units in Los Altos, and the city has been working to establish guidelines despite some opposition.

Good answers

Simitian cautioned against strong-arming people.

"It's a dead-bang loser to say, 'You ought to be providing affordable housing,'" he said, adding that the inevitable question that arises is, "'What's in it for me?' There's an economic argument to make. It shouldn't offend us – it should prompt us to have good answers."

There are multiple reasons people should be "in," Simitian said.

"Without the people who do the real work, our economic prosperity is going to go poof," he said, referring to everyone from teachers to waiters with modest incomes.

Other reasons: Living closer to where employees work means less traffic, and police and firefighters can better respond to emergencies if they live in the cities they serve.

Last week's program stemmed from a Knight Foundation effort encouraging communities nationwide to discuss local issues in a series of "On the Table" programs. Silicon Valley Community Foundation officials selected affordable housing as its focus. The Los Altos event was one of several across the region addressing the issue.

For more information, visit housingtrustsv.org, siliconvalleyathome.org, siliconvalleycf.org or losaltoswomenscaucus.org.