



PD Editorial: Is housing relief in sight for North Bay?

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The dilemma facing Sonoma County couldn't have been presented more clearly than it was on Page 1 of Saturday's Press Democrat.

The lead story ("At summit, a call for new construction") concerned a packed forum Friday in Petaluma on the growing crisis that North Coast residents face in finding affordable places to live. With rents having increased roughly 30 percent in the past three years and with median home prices breaking the \$500,000 mark, this is considered one of five hottest markets in the nation for both rentals and home sales.

While that may be good news for property owners, it presents difficulties for many, including business owners who are struggling to attract and hold onto employees.

That was the central theme of the North Bay Housing Summit, sponsored by the North Bay Leadership Council, that challenged elected officials, business leaders, educators and nonprofit groups to come up with creative solutions.

But just below this article was another housing story, one that demonstrated the barriers to solving this problem ("Windsor's Bell Village project draws fire"). The story concerned the swelling opposition to a 387-unit apartment complex proposed for an area just west of Highway 101. The Town Council last week received a petition signed by more than 1,000 people, claiming the project would "degrade" their community.

This despite the fact that this apartment complex is in compliance with the city's general plan and would meet long-standing regional goals for city-centered development. This despite the fact that it would be built near the new SMART station, thus meeting community and regional goals of encouraging transit-oriented housing development. This despite the fact that Windsor leaders already approved an earlier version of the project in 2011. And this despite the fact that the county needs the housing.

Fewer new homes were built in Sonoma County last year than in the past 45 years. Meanwhile, the county's vacancy rate is now less than 3 percent, meaning those looking for an apartment face tremendous competition for what few units exist.

But this dilemma is nothing new. The public tends to support housing in general but oppose it in specifics. It's a great idea — until it's planned for the lot down the street. Then it's too dense. Too large. Or it generates too much traffic.

Or, worse, it may attract undesirable residents.

But who is it that it is going to end up living in these rentals? They are most likely our children's

teachers and soccer coaches and the people who care for the parks where they play.

Steve Herrington, superintendent of schools in Sonoma County, said at the summit that the median annual teacher salary is \$66,688, meaning only about 4 percent of beginning teachers in the county can afford a home.

Given that more than 30 percent of teachers in the county are over age 55, Sonoma County is going to need to recruit a wave of new educators and make sure they have a place to call home. It won't be easy. If the county's rental market matched median wages, rents would average \$1,000 a month now, according to John Lowry, former CEO of Burbank Housing. But instead, the median rent is roughly \$1,600 — and climbing.

In the days ahead, we will be evaluating various measures, including some that were discussed at the summit on Friday, for how to address this housing crisis. But it's clear that what is required most is a change of thinking and a change of heart.

Sonoma County needs a focused effort on understanding and meeting its housing needs. And it begins with not opposing every project that comes along — including the one down the block.