

An Affordable Housing Agenda

For the Regional “Sustainable Communities Strategy”



The regional Association of Bay Area Governments (ABAG) and the Metropolitan Transportation Commission (MTC) are currently engaged in an ambitious effort to create a “Sustainable Communities Strategy” to guide development throughout the Bay Area’s cities and counties for the next 20 years. Driven by recent climate change and land use laws AB 32 and SB 375, this “SCS” aims to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by encouraging compact development that allows people to drive less, reducing the collective “vehicle miles traveled” (VMT) of the growing Bay Area population.

While the Sustainable Communities Strategy is often framed as a green initiative, it is just as valid to frame it as a housing initiative. By setting development guidelines and targets, the SCS could help determine what housing gets built where and for whom, and its VMT impacts. Once adopted, the SCS could have dramatic implications for housing affordability. At best, it

will be a blueprint for an environmentally sensitive, geographically balanced, and socioeconomically equitable pattern of growth over the next two decades; at worst it could be a recipe for continued under-production of affordable housing and destabilization of vulnerable low-income communities that become “hot” development markets.

With these two potential futures in mind, EBHO has been working with other advocacy organizations to ensure that affordable housing and equitable development are integrated in the SCS. In November of 2010 we collectively crafted an Affordable Housing Agenda for the SCS.

Principles/Assumptions

- Providing for sufficient affordable homes is a necessary part of any strategy to reduce greenhouse gas emissions from vehicles as required by SB 375.
- Investing in affordable housing near jobs reduces commutes.
- Affordable housing residents use transit at higher rates; therefore investing in affordable housing near transportation centers will help make transit successful. (See The Green Connection article on page 14 for more information.)

- Matching the housing prices/rents in communities to actual income levels of existing and projected jobs assures greenhouse gas reduction while increasing social equity.
- Socially equitable land use and development policy is a value in and of itself.
- Recognizes that healthy communities have a mix of households at different income levels and that housing should be provided for all.
- Explicitly addresses needs for housing affordability rather than relying on the real estate market to set housing costs.
- Stabilizes existing “communities of concern” at risk of housing cost increases resulting from stimulated development.
- Housing affordability needs cannot be met simply through market-based strategies.



Illustration courtesy of Fernando Marti



Goals

The SCS should:

- 1 Create a fair and realistic distribution of housing through the “regional housing needs allocation” (RHNA) process that takes advantage of jobs, transit and community infrastructure (including high-performing schools across the region), recognizing the need to produce affordable housing in suburban jurisdictions as well as urban centers.
- 2 Preserve existing resources for affordable housing and incorporate plans for a new dedicated funding source that is sufficient to invest in producing the Regional Housing Needs Allocation at all income levels, but especially for the most vulnerable, people at the lowest incomes, families with children and people with special needs.
- 3 Incentivize a production balance between market-rate housing and affordable housing through policies such as: linking increased transit and other infrastructure funds to the production of affordable housing, or linking Environmental Review relief to meeting affordable housing needs.
- 4 Incentivize affordable housing production in transit-rich neighborhoods by linking increased transit and other infrastructure funds to the production of affordable housing.
- 5 Prioritize transportation investments to meet existing needs, especially in low-income, transit-dependent communities isolated from regional transit infrastructure.
- 6 Prioritize preventing displacement as the desirability and accessibility of Transit-Oriented-Development neighborhoods rises, and facilitate preservation of existing housing supply through acquisition and enhancement as part of affordable housing strategies, especially in low-income neighborhoods proximate to jobs and transportation.

This Housing Agenda is ambitious, even aggressive, in its expectations for housing affordability and community development. And yet so is the stated intent of the SCS process itself: in July 2010 MTC adopted the target of a 15% per capita reduction in greenhouse gas emissions by 2035, relative to 2005 levels. However, the most recent projections by MTC/ABAG suggest just a 7 to 10% reduction by 2035 under current growth patterns. This means that the SCS will have to find new strategies to achieve the 15% target. From EBHO’s standpoint, we also need to find new strategies to achieve affordable housing and equitable development goals.

While the regional SCS policy-making process may seem abstract compared to EBHO’s direct campaign work, its long-term implementation will impact local planning processes, zoning ordinances and development decisions. City and county jurisdictions will build on the framework set at the state and regional level. If the SCS contains a strong affordable housing agenda, advocates will have more leverage to influence local decision-making. They could also make the argument that more funding for affordable housing is essential if the SCS is to become a reality. EBHO’s current work in Concord and Oakland, for example, is strengthened by tying affordable housing to greenhouse gas emissions goals. While the ABAG/MTC process is long and daunting, we hope pushing for an Affordable Housing Agenda for the SCS will set the stage for truly sustainable communities.

EBHO thanks Peter Cohen, EBHO Policy Director, for contributing this article.

Get involved in our SCS efforts, become an EBHO member, and join EBHO’s SB 375 committee.