

Notes from Alamo Town Hall Meeting (September 8, 2022)

The meeting took place at the San Ramon Valley United Methodist Church in Alamo from 6 to 8 PM. Estimated attendance was 150-200. The meeting was “standing room only” with 20-30 people standing in the back after all seats were full. The meeting was led by Supervisor Candace Andersen and Project Manager Will Nelson. Staff from Supervisor’s Andersen’s office, and consultant team member Barry Miller, also were in attendance.

Supervisor Andersen provided opening remarks and introductions. She provided an overview of how land use decisions are made in Alamo, including the role of the MAC. She also provided an overview of the Envision Contra Costa 2040 program, including the General Plan, zoning, climate action plan, and EIR. The Supervisor reviewed proposals for Alamo, including the roundabout and the concept of a more walkable downtown. Community safety and open space policies were reviewed. Supervisor Andersen noted that many of the policies and actions were being carried forward from the prior General Plan and were already in place. Turning to housing, the Supervisor noted that one way to think about the situation is that “everyone who works in the doctor’s office” should have a place to live in the community.

The Supervisor introduced the Housing Element and explained the State requirement that the County must plan for 7,600 new housing units in the unincorporated areas in the next 8 years. She reviewed the consequences of non-compliance. She further noted that ABAG’s “equity adjustment” resulted in higher allocations in high resource areas such as Alamo. She also noted that the County’s very large allocation, as well as State mandates to affirmatively further fair housing, meant that Alamo needed to absorb some of the 7,600 homes assigned to the County’s unincorporated areas and could not be bypassed. The preliminary allocation for Alamo is 258 units, which is 3.5% of the county total.

Supervisor Andersen introduced Will Nelson, from the Department of Conservation and Development. Will walked through each of the 11 housing sites in Alamo and explained the rationale for their selection. He observed that several were churches, as the State has adopted rules making it easier for housing to be built on church properties. These sites often have large, underutilized parking areas. The supervisor presented slides showing examples of 35 dwelling units per acre and 22 dwelling unit per acre development, illustrating that this was primarily 2-3 story construction and not 4-6 stories, as had been rumored.

Will provided additional clarifying comments about how housing is developed. He noted that the decision to develop is up to each property owner; the State does not force an owner to build anything. There was a brief discussion of SB9, noting that this is a State-mandated law with which all jurisdictions must comply. Will reviewed the General Plan Land Use Map for Alamo, comparing the existing map with the proposed map and noting that the only substantive change is the increase in mixed use density around Alamo Plaza. He noted that the new mixed use designation allows 30 to 75 units per acre. However, there is a misconception that the top end of the density range is allowed by default, which is not the case. There will be a policy for Alamo which limits the density to a lower level within that range, such as 35 units/acre. Will cited the example of Saranap.

At this point, the meeting format shifted so that Supervisor Andersen and Project Manager Nelson could responses to questions that had been submitted from the audience on index cards. The following questions were raised (the responses given at the meeting are provided in italics):

1. How does this plan relate to SB 9? Can we meet some of this need by calculating the potential for lot splits and SB 9 housing units?

Not really—SB 9 is a brand new law and there is no track record on which to base forecasts of future housing production. The State is not allowing jurisdictions to rely too heavily on SB 9 units since we don't know yet how many will actually be produced under the new legislation.

2. Can we count Accessory Dwelling Units (ADUs) to meet our assignment?

Yes. We will take the average of our last four years of ADU production and use that as a benchmark for how many units we can reasonably produce in the next eight years. Based on ABAG data, we can assume roughly half the ADUs will be affordable to lower income households.

3. Where will the water come from for all these new homes?

Will explained that EBMUD is responsible for doing long range water planning. They have already planned for the quantity of development we are anticipating and have identified supplemental sources and conservation measures so that supply is adequate. When EBMUD reviewed the Notice of Preparation for the project, they had no comments regarding capacity. EBMUD did indicate they would have issues with projects located outside the urban limit line. However, no such projects are planned for Alamo.

4. Did you count the vacant fire station on Stone Valley Road as a housing site?

No. The Fire District has no specific proposals for this site, and it may not be large enough to qualify as a housing site. It could be considered for other uses, such as recreation or a community facility.

5. What are the current and proposed height limits?

The current limit on the Alamo Plaza site is 50 feet, which would allow for four to five stories. For single family homes the limit is 35 feet. For multifamily it is 30 feet. We have not yet decided what the new height limits will be. This is an area where the community can weigh in.

6. Will the RHNA for the next eight-year cycle (2031-2039) increase if we don't build these units now?

Right now, we don't know. The answer depends on the real estate market and the State of California. There was very little construction during the 5th Cycle and one of the consequences is that the 6th Cycle numbers were much larger. That is a good indicator that the unmet need will be carried forward if we don't build it now.

7. Does the minimum number of units provided for each site mean we must build at least this number?

Yes. Each site has an associated density range, and a developer must build within this range.

8. How does the State density bonus law apply to these calculations

Will explained what a density bonus is, noting that it allows higher densities for projects that include affordable units. Developers can also request more height and less parking for projects that include affordable units. The County cannot deny these requests if they are needed to make the project work. Density bonus units are not included in the estimates for each site.

9. Has a traffic report been done? Will an EIR be done?

Yes. There are actually two EIRs being done for this project. The County initially did a traffic model to test the new land use plan. However, the map has changed since the initial version, and traffic patterns are continuing to change in the post-pandemic era. Therefore, we are running the model again and adjusting it to reflect new commute patterns and office space forecasts. The EIR does not preclude the need for additional traffic studies when future projects are proposed.

10. Are there economic restrictions on the zoning to meet the equity requirement?

No. There are no specific income requirements related to zoning (in other words, there is no requirement that the housing built on an opportunity site is low-income). However, once affordable units are built on a site, there are economic restrictions on who can live there and how much they pay for housing.

11. Who gets to vote on this? The residents of each community or the Board of Supervisors?

Supervisor Andersen explained that the Housing Element was ultimately approved by the Board of Supervisors.

12. How many units have been assigned to Blackhawk and Diablo?

None, because these communities are very high fire hazard severity areas and have very limited development opportunities. Members of the audience pointed out that parts of Alamo also had very high fire hazards. Staff noted that the proposed housing sites were not in these areas.

13. Why wasn't Alamo Plaza listed as a housing site? Can Blackhawk/Diablo use their golf course for housing?

When a site is designated, the County must be able make the case to the State that it is a realistic place for development in the next 8 years. Alamo Plaza is an active shopping center and is unlikely to be available for redevelopment in the next eight years. Perhaps it can be counted in a future cycle, but not this one. Similarly, the golf course is not a viable housing site in the next eight years.

14. Will the Board of Supervisors overrule the urban limit line? How will you mitigate traffic on Danville Blvd if this housing gets built?

The County can meet its housing allocation without moving the urban limit line (ULL). However, the ULL expires in 2026 and voters will be asked to decide if it should be changed. In any event, the change is unlikely to affect Alamo. Regarding traffic on Danville Blvd, the new roundabout is intended to improve circulation and safety. The County is studying ways to improve I-680, which is considered an innovation corridor for new transportation technologies. We are also working on complete streets projects to make our streets safer.

15. Do we get fined if we don't do this?

Potentially, though this hasn't happened yet in California. The fines could be \$600,000 a month. The County could lose the sales tax funds it relies on for transportation improvements and maintenance. The County would be vulnerable to lawsuits. Ultimately the County could even face loss of land use authority, with the State taking over development and permitting decisions.

16. If the unit is affordable when it's built does it stay affordable when it's sold?

Yes, there are resale restrictions. If an affordable unit is sold it needs to be sold to another lower income household at a price established by the County.

17. Why is a church considered easier to redevelop than a single family home? why are there so many churches on the list?

One reason is that they are large sites, with big parking lots that are empty much of the time. They are also nonprofits and may be eligible for grants to develop housing. They are also located on Danville Blvd, which has transit, road access, and infrastructure, and is a more logical place to develop than established single family neighborhoods.

18. if your goal is to equitably distribute housing opportunities, why are all of the sites on one street?

The sites on Danville Blvd are accessible to transit and the best opportunities for multifamily housing. There is also a precedent for multifamily housing on this street.

19. Is the traffic analysis specific to Alamo or is it county wide?

It's a little bit of both. The EIR analysis is countywide but there will be data available for Alamo's major streets. Also, note that if an actual project is proposed, the County may still require a development-specific analysis. Will Nelson and Supervisor Andersen explained the shift from LOS to VMT and noted that traffic could no longer be evaluated as a CEQA issue.

20. Where are all these people going to park?

Will stated that parking would be required for new development, and that the proposed densities made it more viable to develop parking structures or underground parking than surface parking lots. He further noted that parking is harder to regulate now, especially for affordable housing, projects using State density bonuses, and accessory dwelling units.

21. What about police and fire impacts?

The County Sheriff and Fire Districts will review the EIR when it is released. They will comment on the proposed sites and let us know if they have issues. The sites have been selected to avoid new housing in the areas of greatest concern to the Fire Districts. We understand that public safety is a priority, and this plan does not change that.

22. What about health care services? There are no services available locally and we have to go to Concord and Martinez for healthcare.

Supervisor Andersen indicated this is changing and the County's health plans are adapting to meet current needs. It was also pointed out that public health is not the focus of RHNA or the Housing Element.

23. If California is decreasing in population, why do we need to build more housing?

Regardless of population change, there is currently a housing crisis in the Bay Area. The region is unaffordable for most existing residents. Additional housing is needed to respond to the current shortage.

24. Isn't the Chevron campus in San Ramon planned for housing? Can they absorb this need instead of assigning it to places like Alamo?

Yes, but Chevron is in the City of San Ramon and not under County jurisdiction. San Ramon has a higher jobs/housing balance than most of the county right now, and it makes sense for them to convert some of their employment uses to residential uses. The City has its own assignment of over 5,000 units. It has developed a vision for Bishop Ranch, including features like Santana Row.

25. What happens if we ignore this requirement?

Penalties could begin in 2023. Our planning and land use function could ultimately be taken over by the State.

26. What are the plans for the Hay and Grain site?

Right now, we're not sure. The property has been sold. We would like to preserve the horse.

27. Is there a limit on the number of these units that will be very low income? How will tenants be selected?

Will indicated it depends on who builds the housing. Once very low-income housing is built, it is usually made available through a lottery system. Some communities prioritize school teachers, firefighters, and other specific occupations. Will described the County's inclusionary housing requirement, which states that 15% of all units in new development have to be affordable. He noted that if the project has fewer than 125 units, developers can pay an in lieu fee instead of building the units on-site.

28. Is one of these projects going to be for the homeless?

This is unlikely, as projects serving homeless residents are typically located in areas with supportive services nearby.

29. Will the Board of Supervisors listen to the community and the feedback we are giving you? Do you represent yourselves or the people of Alamo? (Some members of the audience expressed that the County should push back harder against State mandates)

Supervisor Andersen stated that the community's input had to be balanced with the requirements of State law. She encouraged residents to contact their State legislators if they were unhappy about these requirements.

30. If Alamo is getting an assignment of 258 units through the Housing Element process, why do we have a Draft General Plan that allows 3,200 units?

Will clarified the distinction between the eight-year Housing Element cycle and the 20-year General Plan cycle. He further noted that 3,200 was not an accurate estimate of the Draft General Plan buildout. The actual number is smaller and will be refined as we define policies.

31. Where will all of the students go when this new housing is built?

Supervisor Andersen noted that many schools in the County are seeing declining enrollment. Moreover, multi-family housing will not have the same student yields as single-family homes. Studios and one-bedroom apartments typically do not have four persons per household. Will further noted that school fees are collected on new development to cover the cost of new facilities.

32. Can the County come up with creative solutions that allow us to divide up our housing assignment among the cities more fairly? It feels like you are micro-managing each community.

Yes, we are implementing creative solutions now. This is why Alamo is only getting 3.5 percent of the unincorporated area allocation while other communities are getting more. If Alamo were an incorporated city, its assignment would likely be more than 600 units.

33. Why is New Life Church on the list?

Staff responded that this site had a very large parking area, and State rules favored the use of such sites as housing.

The meeting was adjourned at 8 PM. Staff remained on-site for an additional 20 minutes to talk informally with audience members.