

Innovative trends in housing needed to lower costs

By Mary Lydon and David Allen

Aligned leadership at the city of San Diego, county of San Diego and state of California are all working feverishly to put policy into place to help ease the housing affordability squeeze and catalyze the building of more housing units that fit the budgets of middle and low income families. All great news, yet the implementation of new policies and bonds could take months, if not years, to execute.

In the meantime we need to think about housing differently and come up with attainable strategies and products that are less expensive to build now. Developers, designers, business leaders, and concerned citizens have been meeting through groups like Housing You Matters, the San Diego chapter of the American Institute of Architect's Housing the Next Million, Circulate San Diego, the Building Industry Association of San Diego and many others and there is concurrence that transit-oriented infill development is a key strategy to addressing our housing supply problem. We need to make sure that it's done right.

For years, San Diego's land use policies have made individual car ownership the centerpiece for all building types to be designed around. The result has been a two-pronged affordability crisis for the citizens of San Diego: 1. Housing costs that are artificially inflated by supply-constraining, auto-oriented development regulations; and 2. Land use patterns that reinforce reliance on cars for nearly all daily errands.

The proof is in the data. According to the Center for Neighborhood Technology's Housing and Transportation Affordability Index, San Diegans, on average, spend 55 percent of their income on housing and transportation costs. This proportion makes San Diego a considerably more expensive city in which to live than New York City (39 percent), or San Fran-



Image/Courtesy of Trestle Development

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cisco (41 percent).

To reverse this trend, San Diego needs to embrace bold strategies that enhance our existing Urban Village network and pave the way for smart, mixed-use, infill districts that reduce dependence on automobiles and leverage investments in infrastructure and transit. In the San Diego of tomorrow, location efficiency is integral to affordability.

Forward thinking cities like Seattle (46 percent H+T Index) have implemented village strategies worth emulating. In Seattle, within the core commercial zones of an urban village

boundary, development intensity is governed by form-based zoning (considers factors like floor area ratio and height limit), rather than zoning based on dwelling units per acre or other subjective pseudo-metrics.

A more flexible method, form-based zoning allows for a greater mix of uses and building types in areas where the highest development intensity is planned.

Furthermore, inside Seattle's urban village boundary, minimum parking requirements are eliminated for developments within walking distance of frequent transit, giving developers greater flexibility to work with small and irregular shaped sites – common with infill development.

The result is a network of walkable villages that offer a variety of housing types spanning the affordability spectrum from luxury to subsidized, townhomes to micro apartments, along with the commercial uses to support them.

But you don't need to fly to Seattle to observe the benefits of a form-based approach to density in an urban villages setting. That same approach – mingling innovation, variety, and vibrancy – is emerging right here in downtown San Diego.

Trestle Development's Nook project in East Village is a prime example of housing typology made possible by form-based zoning. When complete, the Nook will provide 91 affordably priced micro-units on a site that, were it not downtown, would have only allowed for 10-20 larger luxury units.

The Nook also features a Walk Score of 92, onsite car sharing, and extra bike storage in lieu of parking. The reduced parking requirement lowered the total development costs by up to \$30,000 per unit – a savings directly transferred to the consumer as lower rent. When complete in Q3 2017, the Nook will be leased to individuals earning up to \$50,950 (80% of the Area Median Income).

The Nook is a great example of innovative methods for lowering the cost of housing and we need more of these. We need to continue to try new products and systems to see if they work. We propose the creation of a pilot program for Urban Village Nodes. These Nodes would have criteria that need to be adhered to, would be expedited through the planning process, have reduced fees, and offer gap financing from San Diego Housing Commission's new Transit Oriented Development fund.

Each Node would have a stakeholder group comprised of community members and professionals that monitor the pilot project's attributes that match the needs of the community in which it resides.

The future of housing is now and we need to move into action. We're in. Will you join us?

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