

Policy lacking on affordable housing

By J.P. SQUIRE

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The advisory planning commission meeting last week was an example of what happens when city staff lack direction from council and both fly by the seat of their pants. Commission members didn't get the full story on Allaire Properties' proposed 65-unit townhouse project, Sienna in the Mission, on Lakeshore Road. Several criticized president Mark Allaire's \$32,500 contribution to the city's affordable-housing fund, describing it as "a joke" and "a farce." The issue is density bumping, where a developer receives a higher density than the official community plan allows in exchange for making some units "affordable" under the city's affordable-housing guidelines. That doesn't work with Allaire because all 65 units are 1,300 square feet and have three bedrooms. So he proposed a cash-in-lieu contribution of \$500 per unit.

Other developers have included a few token small units and designated them affordable because city planners unofficially want half of the increased number deemed so. The city has now hired a consultant to come up with a firm policy – likely half of the increased number of units and half the increased square footage designated as affordable. That still won't deal with the suggested cash contribution from Allaire and possibly other projects already in-stream. "I've been working closely with the city for the last six months, and I'm caught in the middle of that," said Allaire.

APC members didn't know it, but the company's offer of \$500 per unit came out of discussions with city officials, explained Allaire. "That number didn't come out of the sky. It was given to me as an example by the city, so we put it forward. And then the city realized it was getting a little dicey," he said, so another meeting was held last week.

During the past month, the issue of affordable housing reached a new level of political awareness, in part, because of The Daily Courier's two-week series coinciding with Homelessness Awareness Week.

"I'm waiting for the city to get back to me. I don't know if my application goes back to the APC or it may go straight to council. Council is aware of this project and how it is going forward; I've talked to members about it," said Allaire.

"I'm the first one who told the city I support affordable housing. I'm a believer in it. Certain projects can make it work, and some can't. (Sienna) is the right project at 65 units for that area. If they want 600-square-foot units, then I'll go for 150-160 units in there, but that's not the right thing to do. That's not the right area." All he will say at this point is the cash-in-lieu will be substantially more. "I don't know if that's going to happen next week, the week after. It could be a month before we resolve that. Unfortunately, I'm at the mercy of the city because they don't have any real firm policy in place other than they've given me a direction that I've moved forward on," he said.

"We just have to work out the issues over the affordable housing contribution," added Shelley Gambacort, the city's current planning supervisor. "He's going to provide me with a letter on Tuesday, updating his position on it. Hopefully, we can proceed from there. Until I actually have something in writing from him, I really don't want to comment one way or the other."

She admitted the planning department doesn't have any council direction to help address this type of issue. "We have had other projects that have done cash contributions, but until we actually get some strong council direction on this . . ."

Ledingham McAllister Communities, for example, contributed \$100,000 to the city's housing reserve fund in connection with a height variance for its Waterscapes project, specifically a 183-unit, 26-storey condominium tower called Skye at 1089 Sunset Dr. Prices range from \$289,900 for a 709-square-foot, one-bedroom-and-den suite to \$989,900 for a two-bedroom-and-den, 1,508-square-foot unit higher up.

In all, the Waterscapes neighbourhood will consist of the Skye tower and eight lowrise buildings for a total of 780 homes. Construction on the highrise and the first two Herons buildings will start before year end for October 2009 and November 2008 completion, respectively. Construction has already started on a nine-acre underground parking structure that will be the base of all the buildings.