



December 11, 2024

**VIA EMAIL**

Planning Commission  
County of Santa Cruz  
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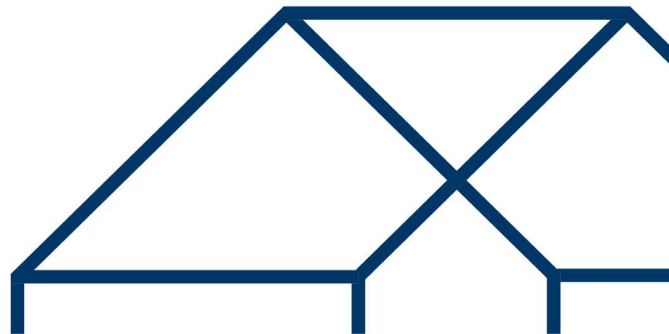
RE: 2450 Mattison Lane  
*Agenda Item 7., Case No. 221077*

To the Planning Commission:

Californians for Homeownership is a 501(c)(3) organization devoted to using legal tools to address California's housing crisis. We are writing regarding the project at issue in Case No. 221077. The County's approval of this project is governed by the Housing Accountability Act, Government Code Section 65589.5. For the purposes of Government Code Section 65589.5(k)(2), this letter constitutes our written comments on the project.

The Housing Accountability Act generally requires the County to approve a housing development project unless the project fails to comply with "applicable, objective general plan, zoning, and subdivision standards and criteria, including design review standards, in effect at the time that the application was deemed complete." Gov. Code § 65589.5(j)(1). To count as "objective," a standard must "involve[e] no personal or subjective judgment by a public official and be[] uniformly verifiable by reference to an external and uniform benchmark or criterion available and knowable by both the development applicant or proponent and the public official." Gov. Code § 65589.5(h)(8). In making this determination, the County must approve the project if the evidence "would allow a reasonable person to conclude" that the project met the relevant standard. Gov. Code § 65589.5(f)(4). Projects subject to modified standards pursuant to a density bonus are judged against the County's standards as modified. Gov. Code § 65589.5(j)(3). And it appears that this project qualifies for the special provision requiring the County to ignore inconsistent zoning under subdivision (j)(4) of the Act.

The County is subject to strict timing requirements under the Act. If the County desires to find that a project is inconsistent with any of its land use standards, it must issue written findings to that effect within 30 to 60 days after the application to develop the project is determined to be complete. Gov. Code § 65589.5(j)(2)(A). If the County fails to do so, the project is deemed consistent with those standards. Gov. Code § 65589.5(j)(2)(B).



If the County determines that a project is consistent with its objective standards, or a project is deemed consistent with such standards, but the County nevertheless proposes to reject it, it must make written findings, supported by a preponderance of the evidence, that the project would have a “specific, adverse impact upon the public health or safety,” meaning that the project would have “a significant, quantifiable, direct, and unavoidable impact, based on objective, identified written public health or safety standards, policies, or conditions as they existed on the date the application was deemed complete.” Gov. Code § 65589.5(j)(1)(A); *see* Gov. Code § 65589.5(k)(1)(A)(i)(II). Once again, “objective” means “involving no personal or subjective judgment by a public official and being uniformly verifiable by reference to an external and uniform benchmark or criterion available and knowable by both the development applicant or proponent and the public official.” Gov. Code § 65589.5(h)(8).

Even if the County identifies legally sufficient health and safety concerns about a project, it may only reject the project if “[t]here is no feasible method to satisfactorily mitigate or avoid the adverse impact . . . other than the disapproval of the housing development project . . . .” Gov. Code § 65589.5(j)(1)(B). Thus, before rejecting a project, the County must consider all reasonable measures that could be used to mitigate the impact at issue.

These provisions apply to the full range of housing types, including single-family homes, market-rate multifamily projects, and mixed-use developments. Gov. Code § 65589.5(h)(2); *see Honchariw v. Cty. of Stanislaus*, 200 Cal. App. 4th 1066, 1074-76 (2011). And the Legislature has directed that the Act be “interpreted and implemented in a manner to afford the fullest possible weight to the interest of, and the approval and provision of, housing.” Gov. Code § 65589.5(a)(2)(L).

When a locality rejects or downsizes a housing development project without complying with the rules described above, the action may be challenged in court in a writ under Code of Civil Procedure Section 1094.5. Gov. Code § 65589.5(m). The legislature has significantly reformed this process over the last few years in an effort to increase compliance. Today, the law provides a private right of action to non-profit organizations like Californians for Homeownership. Gov. Code § 65589.5(k). A non-profit organization can sue without the involvement or approval of the project applicant, to protect the public’s interest in the development of new housing. A locality that is sued to enforce Section 65589.5 must prepare the administrative record itself, at its own expense, within 30 days after service of the petition. Gov. Code § 65589.5(m). And if an enforcement lawsuit brought by a non-profit organization is successful, the locality must pay the organization’s attorneys’ fees. Gov. Code § 65589.5(k)(2). In certain cases, the court will also impose fines that start at \$10,000 per proposed housing unit. Gov. Code § 65589.5(k)(1)(B)(i).

In recent years, there have been a number of successful lawsuits to enforce these rules:

- In *Eden Housing, Inc. v. Town of Los Gatos*, Santa Clara County Superior Court Case No. 16CV300733, the court determined that Los Gatos had improperly denied a subdivision application based on subjective factors. The court found that the factors cited by the town, such as the quality of the site design, the unit mix, and

the anticipated cost of the units, were not objective because they did not refer to specific, mandatory criteria to which the applicant could conform.

- *San Francisco Bay Area Renters Federation v. Berkeley City Council*, Alameda County Superior Court Case No. RG16834448, was the final in a series of cases relating to Berkeley's denial of an application to build three single family homes and its pretextual denial of a demolition permit to enable the project. The Court ordered the city to approve the project and to pay \$44,000 in attorneys' fees.
- In *40 Main Street Offices v. City of Los Altos*, Santa Clara County Superior Court Consolidated Case Nos. 19CV349845 & 19CV350422, the court determined that the Los Altos violated the Housing Accountability Act, among other state housing laws, by failing to identify objective land use criteria to justify denying a mixed-use residential and commercial project. The City was ultimately forced to pay approximately \$1 million in delay compensation and attorneys' fees in the case.
- In *Californians for Homeownership v. City of Huntington Beach*, Orange County Superior Court Case No. 30-2019-01107760-CU-WM-CJC, a case brought by our organization, the court ruled that Huntington Beach violated the Housing Accountability Act when it rejected a 48-unit condominium project based on vague concerns about health and safety, including traffic concerns similar to those raised by comments on the project you are considering. Following the decision, the City agreed to pay \$600,000 in attorneys' fees to our organization and two other plaintiffs.

Based on the above legal framework, state law requires the County to approve this project. We have also considered the County's environmental review for the project and determined that it complied with state law. We urge you to approve the project.

Sincerely,



Matthew Gelfand