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COMMUNITY LEADERS WANT CITY OF SONOMA TO IMPROVE DRAFT HOUSING PLAN

September 26, 2022 (Sonoma) Sonoma Valley Collaborative's forum of community leaders has asked for substantial changes to the City of Sonoma's draft eight-year housing plan, called the Housing Element, in order to address the housing affordability crisis that affects every aspect of the Sonoma Valley community.

Signed by 24 member organizations of the Sonoma Valley Collaborative's Council, the group's nine-page letter is based on a consensus housing policy platform supported by the entire range of community interests represented in Sonoma Valley Collaborative after several months of research and deliberation.

"At the hospital, it's becoming more and more evident that the lack of affordability is affecting us. Ten years ago, 40% of our employees lived in Sonoma Valley, now it's about 30%. That has significant impacts to staff availability, commuting costs, and community engagement" says John Hennelly, CEO Sonoma Valley Hospital.

The group has identified major areas of improvement necessary to increase, improve, and preserve housing that is affordable for people who live or work in Sonoma Valley.

"In comparing the City of Sonoma's housing element with our consensus platform, we found multiple opportunities to provide specific policies that would help set the City on the right path", states the group's Project Director, Caitlin Cornwall.

The letter recommends 29 specific changes to the City of Sonoma Housing Element that would ease approvals and reduce costs for new projects that build homes in the City that are more affordable, integrate households of varying incomes and sizes into diverse neighborhoods, reduce the number of whole-house vacation rentals and second or empty homes over time, protect tenants from sudden rent increases and arbitrary evictions, increase housing for and prevent displacement of moderate-, low-, and very low-income residents, allow smaller multi-unit buildings in all residential zones, and allow diverse types of homes in all residential zones, including smaller multi-unit buildings, tiny homes, alternative safe construction approaches, and “missing middle” housing.

A La Luz Center client shares that she “lives on the edge of financial security” with her family in Sonoma Valley, despite her household having 2 full-time income streams. “There are times we must sacrifice paying for medication or food so we can pay the rent”. Leonardo Lobato, La Luz Executive Director, adds that “so many families are struggling, facing impossible choices, or just moving away.”

The group discovered a potentially substantive error in the draft plan, in which the City reported there was no risk of low-income housing units having their low-rent subsidies expire. Such homes are key to Sonoma’s social fabric; some examples are the quaint senior cottages facing Vintage House across the bike path. In fact, many Sonoma homes with subsidized costs for low-income residents are at risk of losing their lower-income protections, some as soon as next year. City staff and their consultant are re-examining the data to assure the plan priorities expiring subsidies, so that these neighbors can keep their affordable homes.

“Sonoma Valley Housing Group has, from the beginning, backed Sonoma Valley Collaborative’s effort on housing because we believe it moves the needle in the direction we want. The platform may not encompass everything we want, but their effort moves the issue into the quadrant we want.” Fred Allebach, Sonoma Valley Housing Group

Sonoma Valley Collaborative’s letter also corrects a statement in the draft Housing Element that “there are no known historic patterns of segregation by race and ethnicity” in Sonoma. In fact, deeds of many Sonoma parcels still explicitly exclude people who are not

“Caucasian” from living on the parcel, though these provisions are no longer enforceable. “Sonoma need not be defined by this history, but we should acknowledge it and commit to policies that will achieve a fair housing future”, says Cornwall.

The full letter, along with a housing advocacy toolkit to help the public influence the Housing Element, is available at www.sonomavalleycollaborative.org/housingadvocacy. Sonoma Valley Collaborative members will be organizing workshops to help people effectively advocate for pro-housing policies that will help them, their families, their businesses, and their organizations.

Sonoma Valley Collaborative received a \$60,000 grant from Sonoma Valley Catalyst Fund to advocate for housing affordability policies, projects, and funding.

Sonoma Valley Collaborative is hosted by Sonoma Ecology Center and has a membership of almost 30 organizations, agencies, and local businesses ranging from Sonoma Valley Chamber of Commerce, Sonoma Valley Hospital, La Luz Center, Sonoma Valley Mentoring Alliance, Disability Services & Legal Center, Sonoma Valley Housing Group, Sonoma Valley Community Health Center, Sonoma Valley Education Foundation, and Sonoma Valley Vintners and Growers Alliance.

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