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Tell Us Your Views: Readers weigh in on infill projects

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The question: Do you support infill projects, such as condos?

The answers:

I belong to the group of families wishing to buy 6041 Illinois Ave. to create Sycamore Village as a walkable, family-friendly cohousing community. I am responding to letters from Ron Potts (March 1) and Sue Pimentel (March 8).

Many cohousing communities have experienced neighborhood opposition in the beginning. As the neighbors grow to understand the positive benefits, that opposition has disappeared. In Sebastopol, three neighbors who were initially opposed to cohousing cut holes in their fences so they could participate in the community. In Emeryville, the leader of the opposition says he would not have objected if he had understood what good neighbors and involved citizens his cohousing neighbors would become.

Ron, Sue and their neighbors have concerns about traffic, density, visual impact and property values. All equate to quality of life. I believe that cohousing residents share the same concerns for health and safety, for beauty, for a connection with nature, for friendship and cooperation with their neighbors and for financial security. What may differ is the way we choose to satisfy these needs. Here is why I chose cohousing:

1. Traffic: Much of the traffic involves taking children to and from school. The two schools on Illinois Avenue have a combined enrollment of about 1,350 students. It does not appear that 35 families will add very much to the traffic. Cohousers try to avoid driving. As an example, at Nevada City cohousing, a 12-passenger van ferries kids to a school across town. Cohousing revolves around principles of cooperation, so carpooling is easier. Cooperation doesn't end at the property line; there are opportunities for cohousing residents to cooperate with surrounding neighbors on many things.

There is other research into the latest solutions to the traffic problems in this country. Google "smart growth" and "new urbanism." These challenge our assumptions about what creates more traffic. I wish cohousing had arrived in our communities years ago. We could have clustered homes, reduced traffic, and preserved open space, all at the same time.

2. Density: The 3.5-acre lot in question adjoins commercial property. The property is in the Greenback Lane commercial corridor, which is identified by county planners as an area to focus

growth, investment and revitalization to promote public transit and reduce urban sprawl. The concept of the commercial corridor was supported at the Orangevale public workshop I attended last September, along with about 60 Orangevale residents. For more information, visit corridors.saccounty.net/.

As Tony Recchia pointed out in his March 8 letter, Thelen Court used to be a ranch. It was rezoned from one home per acre to four more than 25 years ago, so that homes could be built for Sue Pimentel, Ron Potts and their neighbors. As population grows, some kind of development is inevitable. As a region, we can choose between perpetuating urban sprawl or concentrating infill in commercial corridors. I think the corridor strategy will result in a stronger, healthier Orangevale, with more profitable businesses and more bus routes.

3. Visual impact: The neighbors on Thelen Court don't want to see two-story buildings across their fence. We have listened to these concerns and altered our design so that our homes will be set back 80 feet, among preserved oak and sycamore trees, with garages and closed carports along the fence as a buffer. Contrast this to the typical mode of development: two-story houses built as big as can be, with a 15-foot strip of setback for a yard.

4. Property values: Cohousing has been in this country for more than 15 years, with proven success: high resale values and waiting lists for new homes. Cohousers enjoy private homes and private finances, yet they have generous shared facilities. Cohousing consistently increases the value of surrounding homes. Sycamore Village will be owner-occupied, so there will not be a problem with poor maintenance by renters. Our community will differ from a typical condo development. Sycamore Village will be resident-managed by people who know and care about each other and who have made a commitment to working cooperatively. For more information, visit www.OrangevaleCohousing.org.

Cohousing residents are energetic, creative people. They are problem-solvers. Many involve themselves with the surrounding community. At Muir Commons in Davis, the Girl Scouts and Neighborhood Watch meet in the common house. At Sacramento Cohousing, the cohousers started a community garden in Southside Park and arranged funding for a youth clubhouse as a safe place for kids to go after school. Neighbors of cohousing communities stand to gain a free community development department in addition to a neighborhood meeting place.

So let's continue the conversation. All of our lives will be enriched by mutual understanding. The neighbors' concerns will be addressed at future meetings, both privately and publicly. We are more than willing to work with the neighbors to achieve a mutually acceptable solution.

-- Marty Maskall

Fair Oaks