

Brad Breithaupt: Fair Housing plan can shift Marin's housing debates

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I COVERED a hearing in San Rafael on a plan to build a solar-powered affordable housing complex in a long-abandoned quarry in San Rafael.

Politically, the proposal was DOA, due to stiff neighborhood opposition — a familiar scenario in Marin.

What was unusual was when a councilwoman from Rohnert Park stood up in support of the development and argued that the city's process excluded people who need the housing from its deliberations. This was nearly 30 years ago, and Sonoma County officials were griping that restrictive zoning imposed in Marin was putting pressure on them to make room for housing.

Her advice was not warmly received. But her point about giving people who need housing a greater say is a big part of the county's controversial adoption of a fair housing plan.

The county has a legal obligation to come up with a plan that "affirmative furthers antidiscrimination goals of fair housing." That means opening the doors of predominantly white Marin wider to minorities, the disabled and single-mother families.

The risk in not doing so is the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development could fine Marin for failing to do its fair share. In 2009, HUD slapped New York's Westchester County with more than \$60 million in fines for failing to advance federal fair housing goals.

Marin officials are worried they are HUD's next target. In fact, the county

Board of Supervisors last year — with little public review — endorsed a consent decree promising HUD it would come up with a plan to improve opportunities for minorities — racial and disabled — to move to Marin, which is 75 percent white and one of the nation's most expensive places to live.

The HUD fines and order that Westchester use that money to build more affordable housing got Marin officials' attention.

Marin's dilemma is how do you increase housing opportunities for minorities, with county's high-priced real estate, restrictive zoning and political resistance toward growth? How do you create a strong local political resolve that can overcome firestorms that often erupt over affordable housing plans across Marin.

Even in Marin's 2007 "green" countywide plan, goals to build affordable housing in Kentfield, Tamalpais Valley and on the St. Vincent's/Silveira Ranch properties in San Rafael were watered down after running into stiff local opposition. The plan adopted by supervisors last week reopens those debates, calling for re-zoning areas to allow for higher densities to promote affordable housing.

A large part of the county's process in coming up with its fair housing plan was to reach out to minorities in Marin to get involved. Officials also are talking about expanding the county panel that doles out HUD grants so that it includes minorities. The county and Marin cities will also have to demonstrate to HUD annually how their use of federal dollars actually promotes anti-discrimination and increase integration.

A large part of the county initiative's political problem, however, was that there was little outreach to housing opponents. That includes in Novato, where a battle over building more government-mandated affordable housing has dominated local politics. The county-approved plan is just another target for that fury.

Just wait until the plan winds up on the Novato City Council's agenda for its endorsement. Will those who need the housing and minorities who feel excluded from living in Marin have a say in those decisions?

If the county abides by its agreement with HUD, they will. If they get the same treatment that the Rohnert Park councilwoman received, Marin may have a big price to pay.

Brad Breithaupt is the IJ's opinion page editor. His column appears on Wednesdays.