

Public comment on 4th Street West, South Lot agenda item
For 1/10/19 Planning Commission meeting

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Esteemed Planning Commission and city planning staff,

Given the attention on other local projects, this South Lot project seems to be sliding by the radar. The developer has assiduously sought to mollify the neighbors, with a low density, market rate project, yet the project has many of the same issues as the Broadway and MacArthur Gateway project, one that is now being sued, part-ways on the basis that the affordable components will be way too small, in the worst spots, and likely at the highest end of "affordable" (120% AMI).

The South Lot project represents what can be seen as the east-sidification of central Sonoma, i.e. low density and high dollar. Unfortunately, it seems no one wants high density near them, but high density is exactly what Sonoma needs to grow properly and meet its share of the regional housing burden.

I'd hate to see this project just slide by as-is, without Planning Commission changes to address higher density and more area median income (AMI) affordability, but if it does, then the calls for a more "balanced" spread of housing types in the future will have been largely met, as it has already with a preponderance of market rate, RHNA builds in the city. And so if and when

Sonoma ever gets to addressing its share of the AMI-affordable housing crisis, all that will be left to build will be AMI-spectrum housing, in high density projects along main drags with transportation; these projects will have even more opposition than the South Lot neighbors have brought.

It seems DeNovo has carried on negotiations with the South Lot neighbors, and made some deals, and thereby left the rest of the city and public out of any pre-planning meetings. Of course, DeNovo wants to succeed, and to avoid the Sonoma morass of appeals etc., cultivating the neighbors is good strategy, but maybe what is good for neighbors is not good for the city as a whole?

When everyone thinks about themselves first, we end up with an uncaring society bereft of a sense of social responsibility. It's up to government, the city and its agents, to think of and hold out for a larger good.

My opinion: The city needs to refigure what it wants and needs for housing rather than let market rate developers and protesting neighbors and/or the fear of them, to run the show. The main problem with the South Lot is an out of date Housing Element that is not incentivizing what the city needs (less low density market rate, more high density AMI affordable). This is the exact same pattern as parts of the Gateway project lawsuit, so if rules can be changed mid-stream by lawsuits etc., or by council decree with three votes changing the Housing Element, why not bring to bear the same leverage and pressure on DeNovo?

Gary Edwards had a decent idea, to build three stories there, seniors first floor, families second floor and low income on the top floor. At 50% AMI, this would be exactly what Sonoma needs to meet its housing and demographic challenges.

If the PC does not approve the project this Thursday (1/10/19), or if final vesting is held up by appeal, then the hospital sale of the land will not go through, and the city can maybe then leverage the developer to build more of what is needed... This leveraging can cut some middle ground on the developer's need to break even at least, and the city's housing needs that are far different than a mere 20% inclusion among million dollar homes.

In terms of leverage, the city council should make a few immediate, emergency changes to the Housing Element, to incentivize high density, multi-story, AMI-centered infill, and increase the AMI-spectrum inclusion to 35 – 50%. Developers should also be required to provide neutral proof about “penciling out” issues, so as to show the public exactly why they can't meet the real housing needs of society.

best, Fred