Bay Area gets boost to affordable housing from unlikely source

Advocacy groups push successfully for affordable housing near train stations

By Emily DeRuy, Mercury News, February 6, 2020

“New apartment complexes built near Caltrain stations must reserve at least 30 percent of their units for low-income residents.

“The board that oversees the transit agency approved the policy on February 6, along with rules that residential projects built on Caltrain land must be at least four stories and hold at least 50 units per acre.

“[The board] rejected a request from advocates to give affordable housing developers the right of first refusal on properties that can be developed.

“ ‘Generally, they don’t work out very well for any of the parties,’ said Jim Hartnett, Caltrain’s executive director, of such requirements.

“Robust competition, added Brian Fitzpatrick, manager of real estate and property, ‘is our best bet.’

“Caltrain, the pair said, must create space for the rail network to thrive and grow in the coming years and also determine how best to use what little land the agency thinks it can spare. That means weighing what will bring in the most revenue with community demand for affordable housing.

“ ‘For us it’s about balance,’ Fitzpatrick said, later adding, ‘if you create affordability, you are going to take a hit’ when it comes to revenue.

“There’s also no requirement that such sites be reserved for housing, although several board members agreed housing should be the priority.

“Board member Ron Collins, the mayor of San Carlos, said setting minimum on-site affordability and density requirements will set an example for how cities and counties can spur affordable housing development in the region moving forward.

“Collins pointed to recently built homes near the San Carlos train station as a cautionary tale, noting that the council ultimately allowed a three-story development rather than the six that were initially proposed.

“ ‘That, he said, was a ‘monumental mistake,’ because while the city had a requirement that 15 percent of the units be affordable, the lower density made that unrealistic. In the end, he said, just 10 percent of the 220 units were designated for lower-income residents. ‘That was
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a hard lesson for me to learn,’ Collins said, adding that when a city reduces density, ‘you also reduce your leverage.’ ”

Read the full article here.