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Housing units unfair, county officials say

Supervisors say it's unrealistic to suggest 11,739 new dwellings.

By Cathy Locke - Bee Staff Writer

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El Dorado County officials say the number of residential units a regional agency proposes to allocate to the county to help meet housing needs in a six-county area is neither fair nor feasible.

Members of the Board of Supervisors vented their frustrations last week during a presentation by Greg Chew, a planner with the Sacramento Area Council of Governments. The agency is charged with apportioning the regional allocation of needed housing units set by the state among cities and unincorporated areas of El Dorado, Sacramento, Placer, Yolo, Sutter and Yuba counties.

Although the number has been reduced since the supervisors protested preliminary figures earlier this year, board members said the number is still too high. They said the suggestion is unrealistic that 11,739 new housing units -- or 1,677 new dwellings per year -- would be built in unincorporated areas of El Dorado County during the seven-year period from 2006 through 2013.

Chew said he has heard similar objections to the regional housing needs allocation from representatives of other jurisdictions. But under state law, SACOG must allocate responsibility for about 169,000 new units among 29 cities and counties.

"We have to figure out how to do it equitably," Chew said.

Greg Fuz, county development services director, stressed that the numbers are not a housing production target but refer instead to the amount of land the county needs to zone to accommodate that number of units.

SACOG based the allocation on growth projections in the county's general plan, "but we also noted that we have a number of constraints," Fuz said.

Of the total allocation for the county's unincorporated areas, 30.3 percent, or 3,559 units, are to be affordable to families with very low incomes, defined as 50 percent or less of the median income in the county.

An additional 2,258 units, 19.2 percent, are to be affordable to people with low incomes, between 50 percent and 80 percent of the county median income.

Providing for those categories typically requires zoning land for multifamily units, Chew said.

Supervisor Jack Sweeney said the allocations should take into account topographic differences among the jurisdictions.

"We're not going to put 20 units on most acres in this county. It's just not going to happen," he said.

Glen Campora of the state Housing and Community Development Department said there are ways to provide affordable housing at lower densities, but it usually requires some type of subsidy.

"There may be some other strategies and resources," he said.

Chew said the housing allocations are based on growth projections cities and counties provided to SACOG for use in developing the Metropolitan Transportation Plan.

"You want the best-guess estimate so you get the most money for transportation, but you don't get too much of a burden for housing," he said.

Chew said SACOG is limited in how much it can adjust the allocations, explaining that reductions in one jurisdiction would require increases in others.

The housing allocations are to be incorporated in an updated housing element of the county's general plan. At that point, if county officials believe the number is excessive, Chew said, they can appeal directly to the state Housing and Community Development Department.

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