

OPINION

Marin Voice: Home ownership in Marin should be more than a dream



North Bay Construction Corps students work on a project in Tomales. (Alan Dep/Marin Independent Journal)

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Putting affordable home ownership within reach should be a primary goal, not something that may happen for a lucky few.

The efforts of the federal government, individual states and local governments to provide affordable housing is almost always limited to rental units either through Section 8 vouchers or inclusionary percentages by income categories in new construction.

Unfortunately, much of affordable housing has become an investment business. As with any investment business, the ownership goal is to increase income – thus, rents increase. It takes those seeking affordability further and further from their jobs negatively affecting commute time and distance and increasing greenhouse gases. It can lead to some even losing their housing.

When affordable home ownership is supported by the public sector, it is with inclusionary percentages based on income (moderate, low, very low) with future sales price restrictions remaining for decades. Being able to purchase a home with these restrictions may be an advantage at first, but such restricted ownership removes the incentive to improve the property or expect an equity gain similar to market gain at time of sale.

There are superior ways to those currently being supported to achieve affordable home ownership. These two plans have successfully provided the funding and the creativity needed to reach this important goal:

- The Napa Plan: Developed and in use in Napa County, it provides for affordable home ownership for both existing units and new construction is a work-proximity housing program with an affordable housing trust fund as its base. The fund assists low to moderate income workers in purchasing a home of their choice within 20 miles of their jobs. It is done through a down payment assistance loan of up to 10% of the purchase price.

The loan is a silent 10% equity stake that is repaid when the fund receives 10% of the future sales price. The usual forms of public funding do not allow funds to be used to restrict the benefits to local workers. The Marin Community Foundation could be a major partner in supplying the needed funds to set up such a trust as part of their objective to increase affordable housing opportunities in Marin. MCF currently provides funding through an invitation-only application process which appears to be limited to non-profits that create or operate affordable rental units.

- The Levitt Plan: It provides affordable home ownership through new construction. It is something I learned about while studying architecture.

Levitt houses were constructed as small (800-850 square feet) one-story houses with unfinished expandable attics. The finished center staircase led to the attic which could later be converted to additional bedrooms and bathroom, for example. A major cost of home expansion is in the building's infrastructure – with this plan, the infrastructure was part of the original construction.

The history and evolution of Levittown since its inception after World War II was to provide housing for returning GIs. The concept for these units, even though they were developed for single-family housing, can easily be adapted for multi-unit buildings. There is nothing that precludes a unit in a multi-unit building from having a staircase that leads to an expandable attic.

Making affordable home ownership (either a single unit or as part of a multi-unit building) for local workers achievable not only benefits the homeowner, it benefits the community. It reduces commutes and greenhouse gases and helps build community ties.

Home ownership has played an important role in creating the middle class. For past generations, it has been the asset that gave workforce members the ability to accumulate wealth through home-price appreciation and increased equity in their homes. Affordable home ownership for the current generation is more important than ever as our country's already wide wealth gap gets worse.

Affordable home ownership must be put within reach.

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