

# Housing crisis spurs Berkeley to consider a fast track for affordable housing

*The Mercury News, by Katy Murphy, Bay Area News Group, December 6, 2017, 3:07 p.m.*

BERKELEY — Responding to growing concerns about the lack of affordable housing for low-income residents, Berkeley is inching toward a solution that would dramatically speed up approvals for subsidized housing developments.

In a departure from its famous embrace of civic engagement for matters large and small, the Berkeley City Council late Tuesday unanimously directed the city's planning commission to rewrite the rules so projects meeting Berkeley's zoning requirements will be automatically issued permits — without any public hearings.

Councilwoman Lori Droste, who introduced the proposal, said in a recent interview that the area's skyrocketing rents and home prices, featured over the weekend in a New York Times case study about neighborhood zoning, had become “a crisis of epic proportions.”

“As a city, I think we've always spoken out about the need for affordable housing,” she said, “and this is an obvious path that we haven't taken.”

Droste acknowledged the proposal wouldn't address the challenges of finding money to build subsidized housing, especially if major changes are made to the federal tax code that would wipe out tax exemptions that pay for much of it. But she said, the city must make it as easy as possible to build such units.

To be eligible for the sped-up process she has proposed, a project would have to comply with Berkeley's zoning regulations and half of its units would need to be below market-rate. Projects receiving Housing Trust Fund money for affordable housing would also qualify.

A vote on the yet-to-be-drafted rules is expected next summer, just as California begins requiring many cities, including Berkeley, to speed up approvals to address a statewide housing shortage. San Francisco Sen. Scott Wiener's Senate Bill 35, which takes effect Jan. 1, would force local governments that have fallen short on their state goals for new housing development — which is most cities — to approve eligible projects without hearings.

But Berkeley's vote is hardly a done deal despite Tuesday's unanimous decision and backing from Mayor Jesse Arreguin, said Victoria Fierce, an Oakland resident and organizer with East Bay For Everyone, a pro-housing development group that brought proponents of the proposal to the meeting.

“In Berkeley, everything has a long, drawn-out political process,” Fierce said. “I think that's part of the Berkeley political culture. The real question and the real actual vote will be the actual ordinance, when it comes back next year.”