

Chico council approves land-use changes, gives design review process time to change

By Ashiah Scharaga, Enterprise-Record

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Chico >> Amendments to city land-use regulations and its 2030 General Plan were approved Tuesday by the City Council, with the goal of making residential and commercial development easier.

The council also voted to keep the city's [architectural review board](#) as is, rather than changing it to an appeals board, for at least six months. In August, the council will review its progress to make some efficiency changes. The vote was 6-1, with Councilor Ann Schwab against.

Principal Planner Brendan Vieg said the five-year review is a natural part of the General Plan process, but it is by no means a "rewrite."

Many proposed changes are minor, he said. He highlighted significant changes, such as changing density restrictions for certain zones to allow for more single family development, and rezones along Pomona Avenue that return it to a very low density residential area. The Pomona Avenue rezone vote was 5-2, with Schwab and Karl Ory against.

Many things that used to require a use permit are now regularly allowed uses, and others that used to be prohibited are allowed with a use permit. A full list of changes can be seen in the [499-page report](#).

Language was also added to the General Plan that stipulates city staff will provide opportunities to seek conversations about affordable housing with developers. Affordable housing production has declined in the city. Councilor Mark Sorensen's idea to add "utilizing government subsidies and other incentives" to that section passed 5-2, with Councilors Ory and Schwab dissenting.

Schwab wanted to maintain requirements that a city staff member serves as a coordinator for the sustainability task force and the diversity action plan keeps a scorecard. This failed 4-3, with Ory, Andrew Coolidge, Sorensen and Mayor Sean Morgan against.

Ory commented that the city is "missing a huge opportunity" if it does not attempt to reach out and come up with low-income housing development goals. He said the city should sit down with nonprofit and for-profit community groups and review opportunities for those kinds of developments.

Vieg highlighted city achievements, including strong residential, commercial and industrial development, citing the North Valley Plaza as an example. He also mentioned there is also an adequate supply of vacant land to meet the community's housing needs beyond the Plan's 2030 horizon, with the caveat that readiness of land is an area of concern, and there are not a lot of larger parcels available.

This was debated by members of the development community. City staff will be reviewing Chico's land absorption study to figure out what's going on with land availability and costs, a unanimous council decision. Vice Mayor Reanette Fillmer supported this idea, brought forward by Sorensen.

"We continue to have a housing issue in Chico," she said. She mentioned the market is also competitive because there is limited inventory.

Coolidge said Chico is growing slower than surrounding areas, and that is an issue. The city could find it is just used for its resources without anybody paying for them, he said.

“At this point in time we are desperate for additional land for residential, commercial and industrial development,” he said. “That’s absolutely necessary to the future of this city.”

Design review

Many local developers provided testimony that design review has just not been working well for the city.

In August, the council will review whether the Architectural Review and Historic Preservation Board has become more friendly to developers when it comes to timely review of architectural designs.

Fillmer said the city owes it to them to “find a better process.”

Morgan said he’s most excited about the training of architectural review board members by city staff. He is “continually reminded of the fiasco” when the Chico Children’s Museum’s development was delayed over disagreement on the building’s shade of yellow. It was appealed after a board hearing, and then the developer’s desired shade was approved by the council.

“That’s the type of thing that needs to never ever repeat itself,” he said.

Coolidge told city staff to make sure they have a “tangible way” to show the council that the review process has been sped up by August.

“We just want to see a process that works well,” he said.

Schwab said she was in support of keeping the architectural review board operating regularly, because it “helps keep our bar raised” and makes sure the community is part of a discussion, not just city staff and a developer.

Chamber of Commerce CEO Katie Simmons asked the council to carefully consider the Chamber’s comments, and realize they have city’s best interests in mind. She also expressed gratitude for city staff working with the chamber’s requests during the General Plan and land use regulation review.

“It’s very telling we were able to agree on almost every point we discussed,” she said.

Architect Matt Gallaway said he appreciates the board’s input.

“It’s the practice of (the architectural review board) that’s falling short right now,” he said.

Jim Stevens said developers wait consistently three to four months to hear “well done.” City staff can make that call, he said.

Dan Gonzales, Meriam Park developer, said it’s the delay that’s more costly than a review fee.

“It’s not the \$5,500 application fee, it’s the two- to three-month delay on top of this,” he said. “I don’t need to find out three months down the road that they say they like my project.”

Pat Conroy said he’d be happy to go to the architectural review board when a disagreement arose with city staff.

“It’s redundant and it’s such a waste of everybody’s time,” he said. “We lose a whole building season.”

A couple of community members showed up in support of the board’s current arrangement.

Irv Shifman, former architectural review board member, said public input is a very important part of the process.

“Staff makes bureaucratic decisions, and boards make community decisions,” he said.

Paul Lieberum, president of Chico Heritage Association added that it’s resulted in “improved design” for the city.

Contact reporter Ashiah Scharaga at 896-7768.

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