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L.A. Voters Sent Signal on Urgency of Providing More Affordable Housing

BY PETER DREIER

LOS Angeles voters gave two thumbs up to affordable housing on Nov. 7. The vote is a call for activist government that will strengthen the business climate and share the city's prosperity with its working families. How will the mayor and City Council respond to this overwhelming mandate? It's time to unveil a comprehensive housing strategy so residents have more choices – to stay in their neighborhoods, live near their work, raise their families in a house or apartment they can afford, and – for the most destitute – get off the street.

Almost two-thirds (64.7 percent) of L.A. voters favored Proposition 1C, the \$2.9 billion statewide housing bond, which captured 57.5 percent of the statewide vote. By an almost similar margin (62.3 percent), L.A. voters endorsed Measure H, the \$1 billion municipal housing bond. The city measure failed to win the necessary two-thirds support needed to pass. Even so, voters overwhelmingly said they were willing to tax themselves to help the city build more housing.

The two housing bonds won majorities in every corner of the city. Proposition 1C passed in 14 of 15 City Council districts. In the one exception – Greig Smith's 12th district – it garnered 49 percent of the vote. On Measure H, only Smith's district (44.4 percent in favor) and Dennis Zine's District 3 (49.4 percent) failed to win majority support. L.A. voters were saying

“yes in my back yard.”

These results shouldn't be surprising. L.A.'s median housing price exceeds \$500,000. Less than 2 percent of the homes are affordable to median income earners. Nearly two-thirds of L.A. renters can't afford typical rents. Many working families live in overcrowded and unsafe buildings far from their work, which contributes to traffic congestion and neighborhood blight. There are roughly 48,000 homeless individuals in Los Angeles – the largest homeless population in America.

What to do?

We need to add at least 10,000 units each year for the next decade. The state housing bond will help, but it won't provide L.A. with sufficient funds to reach that goal. To do so, we need a permanent source of funds to continue Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa's commitment to fully fund the \$100 million annual housing trust fund. Like other cities – including Boston and San Francisco – L.A. could adopt a linkage fee on commercial development with funds targeted to the housing trust fund. The city could also enact a fee on luxury housing development, with proceeds going to help working families

afford apartments and homes.

The city also needs to decide where housing will be built. Developers typically construct affordable housing in the poorest neighborhoods. But if we want mixed-income neighborhoods, we can't ghettoize housing for the affluent, middle class, and the poor. To give residents more choices in every neighborhood, we need to site well-designed mixed-income housing throughout the city, especially near public transit corridors to help reduce

traffic congestion.

The city needs to adopt a mixed-income inclusionary housing policy. Already in place in more than 100 California cities, it would require developers of market-rate housing to include at least one-fifth of the units for working families. Luxury housing developers need to make a fair return, but in the past decade they've been raking in huge profits without balancing private profit and public interest. Now it's time to redress that imbalance.

If the city establishes clear guidelines for density, affordability and design, developers will figure out how to make it profitable, as they have elsewhere. Without a mixed-income policy, the pipeline of projects now awaiting

approval at City Hall will transform huge swaths of the city into high-rise gilded ghettos.

But it is not enough simply to build more housing. Since 2001, public investments have resulted in nearly 13,000 new affordable apartments in Los Angeles, but over 11,000 affordable units were lost due to skyrocketing rents, conversion of apartments to expensive condos, and demolition of apartment buildings to build luxury housing.

So a major component of city policy must be protecting the affordable apartments we already have. Minimally, L.A. needs to enforce a long-ignored law allowing the city to stop conversions and demolitions if the housing vacancy rate is below an emergency level of 5 percent.

The Nov. 7 voting results reveal that those who oppose policies to protect and expand affordable housing – a handful of developers, their lobby groups, and a few NIMBY neighborhood groups – are not the mainstream. Now it's up to enlightened business leaders, housing activists, unions, community groups, and faith-based institutions to push the mayor and City Council to adopt policies that will address L.A.'s severe housing crisis.

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