



June 4, 2018

Palo Alto City Council Members
250 Hamilton Ave., Palo Alto, CA 94301

Re: Agenda Item 8: 2755 El Camino Real: Multi-family Housing Project and Workforce Housing Ordinance

Dear City Council Members,

The League of Women Voters of Palo Alto (League) supports actions of the City that improve the diversity of housing opportunities for all economic levels, ages and ethnicities. For this reason, we urge you to accept all the recommendations in the staff report regarding the adoption of a Workforce Housing Combining District ordinance and the approval of the multi-family housing project at 2755 El Camino Real.

At a May 15, 2018 panel discussion on the “missing middle” sponsored by SV@Home, Palo Alto Forward, Bay Area Forward and this League, we learned how the extraordinarily high cost to rent or buy have made it almost impossible for those earning even 120 to 150 percent of AMI (area median income) to live in Palo Alto. The panelists agreed that changing zoning was the most effective solution to address this problem – by allowing increased density in appropriate locations.

While there are several regulatory programs that attempt to address the affordable housing needs of those earning less than AMI, there are practically no such vehicles for the missing middle. The proposed Workforce Housing Combining District (WHCD) ordinance is a major and innovative step which can begin to fill that vacuum. However, this ordinance applies only to sites zoned PF (Public Facilities) and so would have very limited use. Because the needs of the missing middle are so obvious and so great, the League believes that much more needs to be done.

The League strongly urges you to direct staff to return with a proposed ordinance to expand the application of the WHCD ordinance to the City’s various commercial zoning districts: Community (CC), Service (CS), Neighborhood (CN) and Downtown (CD). This would align the effort to build workforce housing with the equally important effort to build affordable housing for those earning less than 80 percent AMI.

In April 2018, you approved an Affordable Housing Combining District (AHCD) that can be applied to CC, CS, CN and CD districts on sites located 0.5 miles from a major transit stop. It makes unquestionable sense to apply a Workforce Housing Combining District to the same areas that the AHCD would apply to. In this way, a landowner could choose to develop such a site either with affordable housing using the AHCD or workforce housing using the WHCD. Such zoning flexibility could do much to increase the supply of housing in transit-rich areas.

Moreover, by expanding this ordinance to commercial zones you would be implementing the critically important policy in the Comprehensive Plan and Housing Work Plan: “To allow for higher density residential development, consider amending the Zoning Code to permit high-density residential in mixed-use or single-use projects in commercial areas within one-half a mile of fixed rail stations....” (Housing Element H2.1.1).

Thank you.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Aisha Piracha-Zakariya'.

Aisha Piracha-Zakariya
President, League of Women Voters of Palo Alto