

As Housing Crisis Continues, Atherton Debates Building New Multi-unit Homes

Town members, Atherton city officials and teachers discuss the impacts of affordable housing and whether Menlo can provide on-campus living

by GEOFFREY FRANCO

On a cool fall night in Atherton, residents gathered in the city council chambers to discuss the issue with the potential to change America's richest town forever: affordable housing.

Every eight years, all local governments in California are required to write a new housing element, or blueprint for meeting state housing requirements, approved by the state. California's Department of Housing and Community Development mandates a 375% increase in new housing units for the 2023-2031 element, according to City Manager George Rodericks.

At the Oct. 11 meeting about the housing element, Rodericks and land-use consultants Lisa Sanders, Diana Elrod and Barbara Kautz detailed the draft housing element to a crowd of mostly-Atherton residents.

Resistance to HCD requirements ran rampant when the meeting was opened to public comment. Parking, the "character of the town" and crime with the potential for gang activity were some of the concerns brought up by residents as potential issues with multi-unit housing. Residents' claims about crime were quickly rebuked by Diana Elrod, a land-use consultant for the town.

Atherton resident Debra Holvick advocated for an amendment to the state constitution put forward by Our Neighborhood Voices. The amendment would prohibit state and local governments from allowing multi-family housing without approval from local voters. "Our Neighborhoods Voices' initiative would change the California Constitution giving the right to towns and cities to override any state mandates if they are not in the best interest of their town or city," Holvick said. "They're giving power back to the people," she added.

The newly-passed state law, known as

S.B. 9, makes it easier to build multi-unit housing, and drew sharp criticism from many residents worried about property values. "Do I want to see God knows what [on empty lots]?" one resident asked the audience. "It will absolutely destroy the values of these homes." They added that four lawyers told them that the law is illegal.

One commenter suggested that Atherton should pay its way out of the HCD requirements by giving money for housing to be built in other cities. Still, Mayor Rick DeGolia noted that this is not permitted under California law and that "Atherton absolutely intends to comply" with the state's requirements.

In fact, housing was one of the dominant issues in this year's city council election. Candidate Greg Conlon ran as a single-issue candidate in his opposition to state housing mandates, and all of the other candidates in the race put housing at the top of their issue list on their websites. "Local government should decide local rules," Conlon said at the Oct. 11 town meeting.

Three of the four candidates who ran called to utilize empty school property for teacher housing as part of their plans to meet state requirements; however, according to Menlo School CFO Bill Silver, Menlo has no such space on its property. "If we had the land to do it, if it was easy to do, we would have done it already," Silver said. "It's not easy."

While the head of school's house is the only remaining residence on Menlo's property in Atherton, the school used to be home to seven faculty homes shared between the school and Menlo College. The Village, as it was known, was home to a close-knit community of Menlo families, according to math teacher and

former resident Henry Klee, but the school tore it down in the late 2000s to make way for the gym. "It was very special," Klee said.

However, the school currently owns 10 residential units in Menlo Park, split between two properties. These are not open to all faculty but rather are rented out to new faculty recruited from outside the Bay Area for a period of two school years, according to Silver. After this period, priority for the apartments is given to new teachers. "It's not long term,



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Menlo CFO Bill Silver



but it gets them here so that they have the opportunity to learn the area and to figure out where they might want to live," Silver said.

History teacher Dylan Cummins moved into one of the apartments with his family after joining Menlo over the summer. "I love being so close to work," Cummins said. "I can walk [to school]."

Latin teacher Jennifer Jordt, who moved into one of the apartments two years ago from Chicago, said the guarantee of housing when she accepted her job at Menlo made the cross-country move easier. While she enjoys being able to bike to school, she noted some drawbacks to living so

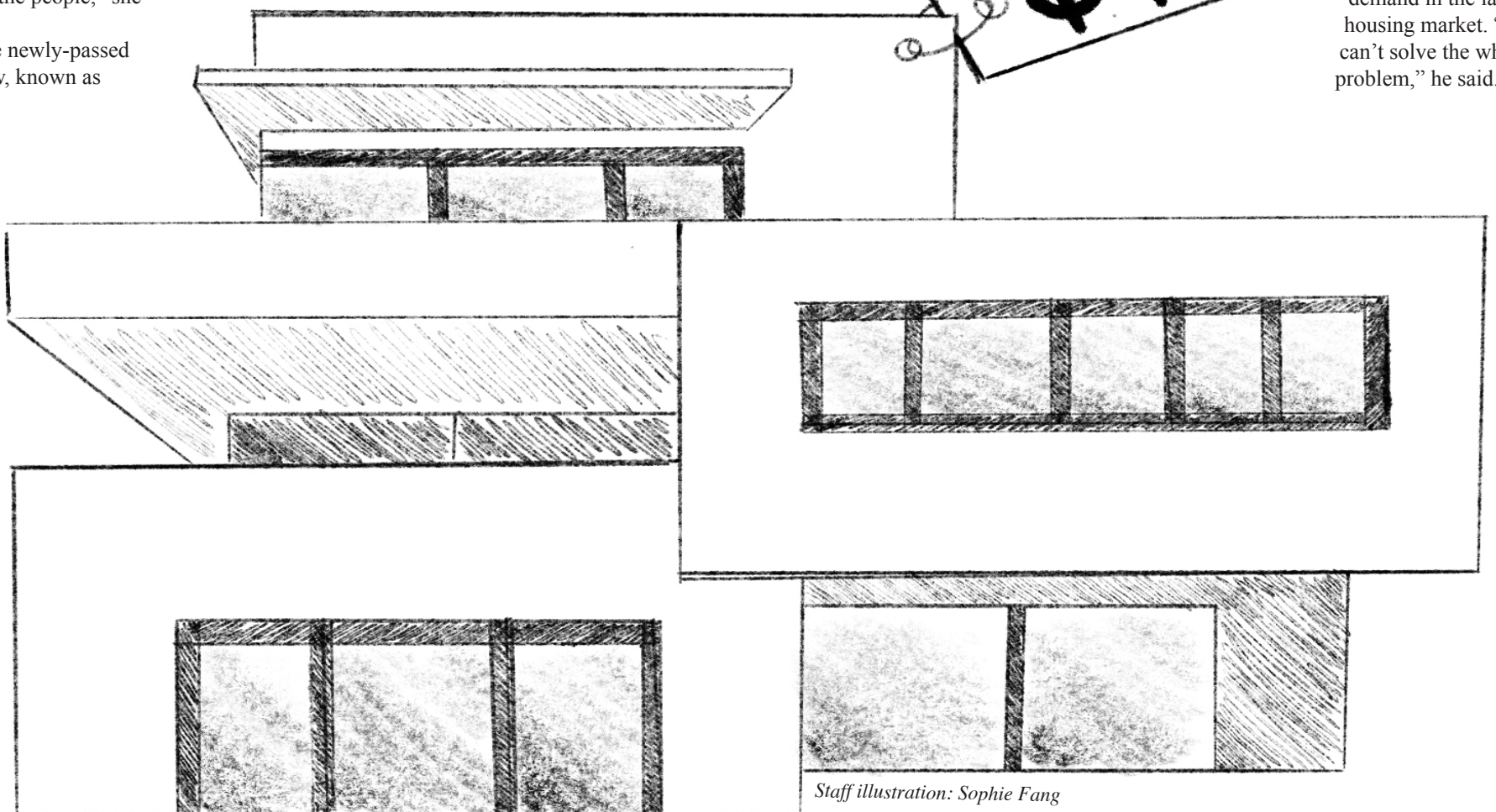
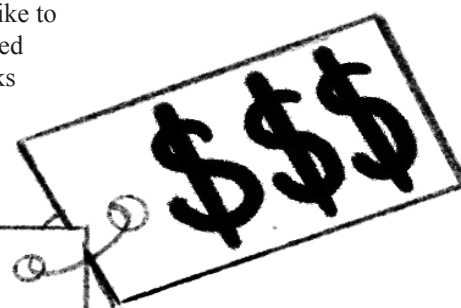
close to school. "There's not a lot of separation of work and home life when you share space with colleagues," Jordt said.

Jordt and Cummins also said that they believe that their apartments are more affordable than a comparable unit in Menlo Park. According to Silver, although the school charges rent at market rates for tax reasons, teachers don't pay as much as they would for a similar apartment in Menlo Park. Silver said this is because the rent Menlo charges reflects the region-wide average for a similar apartment rather than the Menlo Park average, which tends to be more expensive. "Our rents are based on looking at [rent rates] broadly, kind of in San Mateo County and in Santa Clara County," Silver said.

According to Silver, the school is not planning on buying additional faculty housing since there is currently enough to meet the needs of new teachers. He added that the school also tries to improve housing accessibility through the Faculty Housing Loan Program. FHLP allows the school to lend faculty money to make a down payment on a home. Typically, mortgage lenders will require that the borrower pay 20-30% of the home's sale price, according to Silver. "Often, our faculty members don't have that money," Silver said. "So we lend it to them."

Another key component of Atherton's housing element was incentivizing the development of accessory dwelling units, or separate residential units that share property with a larger house. Silver hopes the school can connect Menlo families who have an ADU with faculty and staff interested in renting in Atherton, an idea also proposed by Mayor DeGolia at the Oct. 11 town meeting.

"We're very conscious of the challenge it is for our employees to live near the school," Silver said. However, according to Silver, the problem comes down to supply and demand in the larger housing market. "We can't solve the whole problem," he said.



Staff illustration: Sophie Fang