

## New Harmony finds its melody: Council approves affordable housing project

By Claire St. John March 04, 2009

**F**our hours of argument both for and against a controversial housing project.

A handful of studies cited and picked apart.

Debates about social justice, claims of classism and racism.

Stories of how affordable housing had an impact on local lives.

And finally, approval from the Davis City Council for a controversial affordable housing project.

The project, called New Harmony, will provide one, two- and three-bedroom apartments at the corner of Cowell Boulevard and Drummond Avenue in South Davis for 69 low-income families.

The project got more attention - and more study, analysis and research - than many similar projects because of one factor: All 69 units will be built just 200 to 500 feet away from Interstate 80.

A study published in the Lancet medical journal in 2007 found that Los Angeles children living within 500 meters of a freeway suffered some ill effects on lung development. The study caused the Davis Planning Commission to deny New Harmony.

The City Council, citing the same study, put the project through more rigorous analysis. After a handful of studies all found that a barrier of trees between the apartments and the freeway and some heavy-

duty air filters would make the units safe, the council felt mostly comfortable that it was making the right decision.

'We would like to commend this project to you,' said Sacramento Area Council of Governments attorney Kirk Trost. 'It has really gone through the process and more.'

Unusually, SACOG did its own analysis of the air quality risks on the property and found, like the other studies, that the project was a good fit for a city that needs to fulfill its share of affordable housing for the region.

About a dozen people spoke to the City Council in support of the project Tuesday night, and of them, two physicians said the council had to look at many health factors, not just air quality impacts that may or may not be clinically significant.

Council members said they struggled with the decision, but most came down in favor of the project.

'We should be jumping up for joy with the possibility that we could do this,' said Mayor Pro Tem Don Saylor.

'The risk to these kids is far greater not living in these homes,' said Councilman Stephen Souza, citing long commutes with parents who live and work in different communities, and the possibility that future New Harmony residents are currently living in substandard housing.

'I don't think there's any denying that living close to a freeway isn't the best place

to live. But there's also no denying that we need more affordable housing.'

Councilwoman Sue Greenwald, the lone dissenter, said she couldn't approve a project that put residents 200 feet from the freeway.

'At some point, we have to draw the line and say we've run out of decent land by the freeway for housing,' she said.

Many neighbors of the project also were displeased with the outcome. With several affordable housing projects nearby, some speakers said New Harmony would bring more density and, with it, more crime.

Although Davis Police Chief Landy Black said the neighborhood didn't have a higher crime rate than other areas in the city, Souza directed city staff members to bring back a report looking at crime levels around the city.

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