

Yes vote would bring harmony

By Jonathan K. London, March 01, 2009

Quick: What is the bigger threat to your health — living upwind of a freeway or living in substandard housing or even on the streets?

Too hard? How about this one? Should a City Council approve an innovative infill project that would provide housing for dozens of low-income families or should it reject the project based on one non-site-specific journal article that suggests a possible health risk related to proximity to freeways?

OK, now consider:

What if the city's own environmental impact report concluded that no significant health risk is posed by the project site? What if one of the experts consulted for the EIR was a world-renowned authority on air quality and health who agreed with the negative risk assessment?

What if you knew the developer of this project was not some out-of-town firm looking for a quick profit, but an established local nonprofit organization, dedicated to the empowerment and well-being of low-income people throughout the region?

Is that your final answer?

As you may have guessed, this is not a hypothetical question, but a real-life case in Davis. On Tuesday evening, the Davis City Council will make a final decision on whether to approve the New Harmony project proposed by the nonprofit Sacramento/Yolo Mutual Housing Association. The development would house 69 low-income families in an energy-efficient, walkable/ bikable, smart-growth neighborhood near downtown.

Despite favorable reviews of the proposal over its two-year planning process,

the Planning Commission has recently shifted its stance on the project and the City Council has wavered in its support. This is almost exclusively based on concerns associated with one article that presents a statistical analysis of childhood lung growth and proximity to freeways.

While all relevant data ought to be considered and our children's health is fundamental, there are many compelling reasons why the City Council should approve New Harmony and why this one article is not sufficient grounds for its rejection.

First, let's look at the article itself — Gauderman et al 2007, "Effect of exposure to traffic on lung development from 10 to 18 years of age: a cohort study" published in the *Lancet*. While an elegant study that constructs a robust regression analysis using primary health (lung function) data from children in Southern California and local and regional air quality models, this study cannot easily be applied to the New Harmony case.

This is because the Gauderman study is not site-specific. In addition to its Southern California case location, the air quality monitoring methods used in the study are not as sophisticated as what is currently available and accepted by the state and local air quality management districts as the industry-standard model of evaluating pollution levels at a specific site.

That is, Gauderman can only make weak claims about the potential risk to children in a specific neighborhood and does not provide the basis for a finding of significant adverse health impacts in an EIR context.

On the contrary, three separate site-specific analyses of the New Harmony

proposal conclude there are minimal health risks to its future residents. This conclusion is based both on the actual conditions of the relevant roadways in the Sacramento and Davis area, the configuration of the housing relative to the roadway and the local meteorological conditions.

On top of this, New Harmony's proposed precautionary mitigation measures include redwood trees as pollution barriers as well as high-efficiency HVAC and air filtration systems that would further reduce potential risks.

It is notable that one of the three experts concluding that New Harmony will not be heavily impacted by Interstate 80 is Tom Cahill, a UC Davis professor emeritus of physics and atmospheric sciences and world-renowned expert on air quality. (You may remember him from his analysis of air quality at Ground Zero in New York City after 9/11.)

Cahill has conducted extensive analyses of local weather and air quality conditions. His analysis confirms the independent conclusions by two outside consultants of the minimal health risks associated with the project.

Beyond these technical analyses, however, there are several principles that City Council members ought to consider in their decision. First is the notion of cumulative impacts, a central tenet of the environmental justice movement. This is the idea that health is the outcome not of one factor taken in isolation, but the condition of multiple factors occurring simultaneously and over time.

That is, the health of the future New Harmony residents should be understood holistically considering their current en-

vironments (likely current substandard housing beset by mold, pest problems, poor ventilation and hazardous building materials far from work, recreation and social services); and the health-positive elements of New Harmony (high-quality green construction, walkable/ bikable neighborhood, community garden, sites for social interaction, resident empowerment, access to excellent public schools).

Looking at Davis as a whole, our woeful deficit of affordable housing is a major detraction from our sense as a just and sustainable community. Without sufficient housing for residents of all income levels, we either force lower-income people to commute into town for work, thereby increasing our carbon footprint (unhealthy and un-green) or exclude them altogether from our community (unjust).

Regionally, the award-winning Sacramento Blueprint, which maps out a smart

growth vision for land use for the Sacramento region, relies on innovative infill developments such as New Harmony to achieve its goals for a healthy and sustainable region.

The Davis City Council has a clear choice on Tuesday: approve the Sacramento and Yolo Mutual Housing Association's proposal and bring us closer to our ideals of an inclusive and environmentally friendly community — truly a New Harmony.

Please contact the Davis City Council today and attend the council meeting on Tuesday to express your support of a healthy, sustainable and just Davis community and region.

Jonathan London is a Davis resident; reach him at jonathank_london@yahoo.com. He shares this column with Jann Murray-García of Davis, a physician who holds a master's degree in public health; reach her at jmurgar@comcast.net



Sacramento Mutual Housing Association develops housing that is affordable to a diversity of households. Our housing builds strong and stable communities through resident participation and leadership development.

For more information, call (916) 453-8400 or visit our website at mutualhousing.com.