

College students pitch their plan for city housing

By Malia Spencer/SENIOR STAFF WRITER

A student project envisions high-density affordable housing near the center of Santa Maria, within walking distance of shopping and other services and right across the street from the city's planned transit center.

Looking at the high cost of housing and the number of cases where multiple families live in single-family homes, a team of Cal Poly students saw Santa Maria as a perfect place to design an affordable housing project.

The team designed the project as part of the Bank of America's Low-Income Housing Challenge, complete with identifying a viable site and a financing and marketing plan.

Tuesday night the Santa Maria City Council saw a proposal for 56 units on about an acre at the northeast corner of Miller and Boone streets.

The council seemed intrigued by the student project but there was little discussion after the presentation other than to thank them for their work.

The potential project lies within the proposed Downtown Specific Plan and close to retail, recreation and government sites. The site is also across the street from the city's planned transit center.

The proposal consists of 56 units, including two- and three-bedrooms, with a few one-bedroom units. Places for gathering are also included, such as an interior courtyard for children to play, a coffee shop and an area for a farmers market, said team member Jason Kambitsis, a City and Regional Planning graduate student.

Part of the commercial area would be sold at market rate and that would, in turn, subsidize the rest of the commercial space to allow the farmers' market and maybe other incubator businesses, the students told the council.

Parking is provided for each living unit with space under the building.

Kambitsis said the group had many scenarios but found this one to best fit the community.

"Essentially, you just have to turn the key," he said about the project. "If people wanted to make it happen they could."

The students told the council that through federal low-income tax credits and other agricultural worker housing programs they found that this project could be financially viable. The students also noted that the housing units would be available for those making less than 60 percent of the median income for the area.

The property owner for the site worked with the students, but is under no obligation, project officials said.

However, Kambitsis said he and the team members are optimistic about the viability of the proposal.

"It's a really good project," he said. "The design is great, and the financing is there and the need is there."

In addition to speaking with the land owner, the students also consulted with affordable housing

developer People's Self Help Housing.

This proposal is not the first time a residential use has been suggested for the site.

In the 1990s a 12-unit senior apartment complex was approved, according to city staff, but that approval expired before the project was built.

The student proposal “dovetails in with the downtown plan,” said Bill Shipsey, Santa Maria city planner.

Though the Downtown Specific Plan is not yet approved, Shipsey noted that the proposal would be in a transitional area and the intensified use would benefit from the close proximity of not only the future transit center but also recreation and retail sites.

“The opportunities abound,” for the proposal, Shipsey said.

City Councilwoman Hilda Zacarias also worked with the student team to help them to get to know the community.

Harnessing the vision and hopefulness of students at local universities and colleges is a tremendous opportunity for the community, she said.

“One thing that makes this a wonderful addition (is) it looks at goals for downtown development,” Zacarias said. “(It) creates a community where people can walk to the market or get the bus, or walk to the library, and the mall and City Hall.”

Since Santa Maria has not historically been in the housing development business, Zacarias said, but she hopes the city will consider partnering with an outside group to get the project built.

“I hope the development community sees this as an opportunity to do something positive for the community,” she said.

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