

New San Diego proposal goes beyond housing to seek ‘complete communities’



The Talmadge Gateway project on Euclid Avenue near El Cajon Boulevard is the type of project a new city proposal would encourage (John Gibbins/San Diego Union-Tribune)

Mayor wants more studio apartments and one-bedroom apartments built, holistic approach to housing problem

By [DAVID GARRICK](#)
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SAN DIEGO —

San Diego officials say they want to begin taking a more holistic approach to solving the city's housing crisis that would focus on creating vibrant and complete communities, not just building more housing units.

The new approach is part of a wider proposal from Mayor Kevin Faulconer's staff that also would encourage developers to build more studio and one-bedroom apartments instead of larger units that are less affordable.

The proposal, called the Complete Communities Housing Solutions Initiative, was endorsed unanimously Thursday by the City Council's Land Use and Housing Committee.

Planning director Mike Hansen said this week that the proposal would help solve the city's shortage of affordable housing while also encouraging developers to create neighborhoods that help San Diego meet its climate action plan goals.

"We took a step back a few months ago and decided to develop a new framework," Hansen said.

"We want to meet the needs of everyone in every neighborhood with an integrated land-use management approach that looks at not just housing, but also mobility, infrastructure, parks and quality of life," he said. "We want to be planning the city in a more holistic way."

An environmental analysis of the proposal's impacts must be conducted before it can be considered by the Planning Commission and City Council for approval, which is expected to happen next spring or summer.

Under the proposal, developers would be eligible for a variety of incentives if they meet a set of criteria that aims to achieve the city's goals, Hansen said.

The criteria include that they build their apartment or condominium projects near transit lines, include rent-restricted units for low-income residents and add neighborhood amenities.



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The site of a project must already be zoned for multi-family housing, Hansen said. The proposal does not include any zoning changes.

The number of rent-restricted units must be 20 percent – double the city’s ordinary requirement of 10 percent.

And the neighborhood amenities must help make the neighborhood what the city describes as a “complete community.” Examples could include pocket parks, urban plazas, playgrounds, multi-use paths, linear parks or green streets, Hansen said.

A key change in the proposal is that amenities now required of developers are described as “mitigation,” such as paying for an extra lane on Friars Road if you build a high-rise in Mission Valley.

Under the proposal, amenities wouldn't have to be tied to some problem created by the project, such as traffic. A developer could propose any amenity that would improve the community, like a neighborhood public gym.

Projects that meet all of the criteria would get streamlined approvals, and the ability to build more units than currently allowed on the particular property.

That's because the developer would be allowed to shift the calculation used to determine how many units are allowed away from the city's normal formula, which is number of housing units per acre, to a maximum square footage per acre — called "floor area ratio."

While the change may seem minor, Hansen said, it creates an incentive for developers to build a larger number of smaller-sized units. Smaller-sized units are more affordable to middle-income and low-income residents.

Councilwoman Dr. Jennifer Campbell praised that element of the proposal during Thursday's committee hearing.

"I think it only makes common sense to have it per square foot, but I think the way we have it now has kept builders from building studio and one-bedroom apartments when the fee is the same for them to build a two-bedroom or three-bedroom apartment and charge more for it," Campbell said.

Councilman Scott Sherman agreed, suggesting that the change would, in many cases, encourage developers to build two small units instead of one large one.

"Building two smaller units, the developer will probably make a few more dollars and put that middle-market housing on the market," Sherman said.

Developers could also use the new calculations to shrink the impact fees they pay the city for libraries, parks, fire stations and other community amenities.

While developers would pay lower impact fees, Hansen said, the discount makes sense because developers would be building smaller units with fewer residents, so their project would create less need for new amenities per unit built.

Councilwoman Vivian Moreno, chair of the Land Use and Housing Committee, praised the proposal.

“This kind of incentive package could make a big difference for builders deciding whether to construct in areas that need housing,” she said.

Leaders of the development community have consistently praised using floor-area-ratio instead of dwelling-unit-per-acre as a standard, so city officials said they expect builders to embrace the new rules if they ge