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Affordable housing becomes hot topic in STR debate

By CHRIS COUNTS

MORE THAN 50 people spoke out at a July 13 Monterey County Planning Commission workshop on short-term rentals — and most of them were Big Sur and Carmel Highlands residents who don't want them in their neighborhoods.

Much of the talk was centered on the impact short-term rentals, also known as STRs, are having on affordable and workforce housing.

At Wednesday's hearing, the planning commission wasn't scheduled to take any action, but that didn't stop residents from sounding off on a subject that has inflamed passions on both sides.

Where will workers live?

A number of residents told the planning commission that Big Sur has a workforce housing crisis — and that short-term rentals are making it worse. Tim Green reeled off numbers that he said illustrate how serious the issue is.

"Big Sur has 600 parcels [of land] and 1,200 residents," Green explained. "There are almost 100 short-term rentals out of 200 to 300 rentals. That's nearly half of our rental population."

Steve Beck said he is opposed to short-term rentals, but he understands why a homeowner might be tempted to offer them. "Why would someone rent to someone for \$800 a month when he can rent for \$500 a night?" he asked.

Ken Wright said replacing long-term tenants with vacation rentals comes at a steep price — the loss of what makes Big Sur special. He said not only do his tenants make valuable contributions to the community, but that when a fire threatened his property eight years ago, his tenants stayed on to prevent homes from burning — despite an evacuation order from the county sheriff.

Dale Diesel told a story he said dramatically illustrates how little housing is available in Big Sur for long-term renters, adding that 21 long-term renters lost their homes in the 2013 Pfeiffer Fire, including himself.

"Most were unable to find a place to rent at any price and moved away," Diesel explained.

Fire danger adds to worries

Other Big Sur residents said short-term rural neighborhoods, where homes are often accessed along narrow and winding roads, and the risk of fire is great.

Volunteer firefighter Scott Bogan said recently he was trying to reach a house fire along a dirt road in Palo Colorado Canyon when a short-term renter blocked his passage and delayed him with questions, despite his insistence that he was trying to respond to an emergency.

And, after listing a number of complaints about short-term renters, Jerrie Masten Hansen said she is sad about how the business is changing her neighborhood. "Something so irreplaceable and beautiful is being lost," she said.

Most of the Carmel Highlands residents who spoke were also critical of short-term rentals. Mark O'Shea said he's concerned septic systems in his neighborhood won't be able to handle the increasing number of users, while Lorraine O'Shea said rentals cause so much traffic in her neighborhood that, "I'm a prisoner in my home on the weekend."

Outright ban not realistic

Several proponents noted that the coastal commission recently took a stand supporting short-term rentals.

Dick Matthews, the managing director of the Monterey County Vacation Alliance, warned that the powerful state watchdog agency won't accept an outright ban on short-term rentals. "Your only option is to create a fair and balanced ordinance," Matthews insisted.

And Lisa Leidig said the problems associated with short-term rentals have been overblown.

"My parents are AirBnB hosts," Leidig testified. "They've have had over 100 guests and never had a complaint."

Leidig encouraged the planning commission to "let people use their homes to make money." "It's their right," she added.

Responding to claims that short-term rentals are hurting local workers, Lori Kempf of Palo Colorado Canyon countered that much of what is being rented short-term "is not suitable for employee housing because it's too expensive."

Two residents who operate short-term rentals in Palo Colorado Canyon told the planning commission they feel unfairly criticized by opponents. Sofanya White said she objects to "being made to feel like I'm a bad person," while C.W. Freedman testified that short-term rentals "can't be a scapegoat for all the problems in Big Sur."

"There are thousands of cars causing the traffic — not 40 to 50 cars [the number he said short-term rentals generate at a time]."

Jan Leasure of Monterey Bay Property Management, meanwhile, urged the planning commission to look at how well Pacific Grove's short-term rental ordinance has worked. She expressed optimism that an effective county ordinance can be developed. "All concerns can be addressed," Leasure suggested.

Commissioners weigh in

After listening to the public for more than four hours, the planning commissioners briefly responded to the comments, particularly those addressing the impact of short-term rentals on employee housing.

"Over and over again, we have grappled with the problem of affordable housing in Monterey County," said planning commissioner Keith Vandevere, whose district includes Big Sur and the Carmel Highlands. Vandevere noted that there is a "huge daily migration" of workers going back and forth between the Salinas Valley and the Monterey Peninsula.

"We need to do more to encourage workforce housing," he said. "I'm leery of anything that would reduce it."

While the county's planning staff is working on an ordinance that would permit at least some short-term rentals, it hasn't yet been determined if any parts of the county — such as Big Sur — will be treated differently. Planning commissioner Martha Diehl noted that there are "some areas" where the business might "not be appropriate."

Diehl told The Pine Cone after the meeting that it's too early to say how long the process to create the ordinance will last. She said one more public workshop on the subject will be scheduled, and then county staff will bring forward a draft of the ordinance.