

This follow-up written comment elaborates on an oral comment I made at Goleta Planning Commission's NZO Public Workshop 1 on Feb. 25, 2019.

Request for changes to NZO Section 17.41.140 – Farmworker Housing:

1. Broaden definition of farmworker housing. Allow for agricultural employee dwellings (AEDs) that do not need to meet the California State definition for Farmworker housing, as was similarly done in the recent Ordinances (No. 5068 & 5069) adopted by the County of Santa Barbara on December 11, 2018. The County found that the permit process to develop AEDs was too onerous, such that few AEDs had been constructed. The City of Goleta's proposed farmworker housing standards are so restrictive that it is unlikely that any farmworker housing would be built (see explanation below).
2. Allow AEDs to house employees working less than full-time on the farm. This would still meet the General Plan policies LU 7.1, LU 7.4, and CE11.10 (Conservation easements could be required with development of AEDs). The General Plan does not define "Farmworker Housing", therefore the NZO could add other types of AEDs that still meet the intent of the General Plan.
3. Allow housing for multiple owners of the farm. The NZO would need to find that multiple farm owners were similar enough to farmworkers in order to be consistent with General Plan agriculture policies (LU 7).

Background:

It is well-known that small farms are disappearing. The reasons for this are many, and include: 1) Big-Ag depresses food prices, making it hard for small (esp. organic) farms to compete; 2) The crackdown on undocumented migrants is making it harder to find cheap labor; and 3) Land is expensive, and though the average age of farmers is 62 and they'd like to sell their farms and retire, there are few young farmers with the financial wherewithal to purchase these farms. Thus, as a result of these factors, these small farms end up becoming housing or industrial developments, or are simply swallowed up by Big-Ag.

But, I submit to you that there is another reason for the decline of small farms, and that is the way land use ordinances are currently written. They are based on an archaic paradigm of a single overlord farmer who owns the land and who may hire farmworker employees and supply them with subsistence housing. Ordinances support this paradigm by, for example, specifying that only a single residence can be built for the owner of the farm. (The addition of a single ADU (accessory dwelling unit) relaxes this rule a bit, but not much.) The ordinances also specify that only full-time agriculture employees qualify to live in the auxiliary farmworker housing.

But, what if a group of young farmers pooled their money together, thereby enabling them to collectively purchase a farm and become co-owners? The ordinances would not permit them to live in farmworker housing because they are owners and not employees, so if they wanted to live on the farm then they must all pile into one house, with perhaps a few going into the ADU. This is obviously not ideal. If the ordinance is changed to allow for multiple dwellings, then these owners could enjoy some privacy while having their co-owners as neighbors. One possible unintended consequence of allowing multiple dwellings might be that a housing developer would simply convert an ag parcel into a housing

development. This could be prevented by perhaps requiring that no more than 10% of an ag parcel have dwellings on it, and that all the dwellings be clustered together in one area of the parcel.

Some of the owners of the farm may wish to minimize their environmental impact by choosing to live in "tiny homes" (including those built on trailers). This should be allowed in the new ordinance, with no minimum home size requirement. Another great advantage of tiny homes is that they are ultra-affordable.

These young farmers living on their new farm in these modest dwellings may next decide they'd like to create more of a "village" feel to the place, and invite non-farmers to live with them, housed in their own separate dwellings, either as owners or renters. This might perhaps be a retired person who enjoys the agrarian lifestyle, or could be someone with an off-site job who wishes to live in this village. Again, the ordinances prohibit this possibility. In the current paradigm, housing is designated for either the owner (single residence) or his full-time hired farmworkers.

The new paradigm that I'm outlining is commonly referred to as an "ecovillage", a place where people live together and work co-operatively. Their primary occupation is farming, and to any outside observer the ecovillage appears to be a farm. But, it's also a supportive community, so in addition to the personal dwellings there might be a community gathering building, or perhaps a dormitory for transient residents of the village. In addition to farming, the villagers may decide to start other types of businesses to support themselves. Always the main focus is on farming, though, growing most if not all of their own food, and selling the rest. Being ecologically-minded, the villagers will seek to also generate their own energy renewably, to conserve and re-use water, and to be creative in recycling their waste and sewage (e.g. dry compost toilets).

These ideas I've presented are not new or radical; they simply haven't yet been widely embraced at a policy level. There are some forward-thinking municipalities around the U.S. that have begun to adopt some of these ideas, though. For example, some cities now explicitly permit tiny homes (e.g. Fresno CA and recently SLO), and here in SB County we permit certain types of graywater diversion. There are some cities that have adopted new zoning to effectively permit ecovillages (e.g. Bloomington IN, Ithaca NY, and Chilliwack BC). My hope is that the leaders and planning staff of Goleta will appreciate this new paradigm that I've presented, and make the needed changes to their ordinance to allow for ecovillages, and maybe save a few small farms from disappearing in the process.

Eric Torbet
torbet@do-right-solar.com
(805) 692-5297