

The Berkeley Architectural Heritage Association



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February 22, 2021

Mayor, Councilmembers City of Berkeley
2190 Milvia Avenue Berkeley, CA 94704

Dear Mayor Arreguin and Honorable Members of the City Council:

This letter sets out our organization's position on the proposed city council resolution to eliminate all R-1 zoning in Berkeley. The Berkeley Architectural Heritage Association (BAHA) does not oppose efforts to create more affordable dense housing in Berkeley. BAHA's primary aim is to ensure that whatever housing is built in Berkeley honors Berkeley's unique architectural heritage.

The Resolution currently under consideration falls short of effectuating its ostensible goal – creation of more neighborhood diversity and more affordable housing--and will instead in all likelihood result in the demolition of single-family homes in favor of faceless (expensive) condominiums and/or large student residences leased by the University to house its planned 50% increase in student population. Our concerns are grounded in history, namely the development surge of the 1950s and '60s, during which many of Berkeley's single-family homes were demolished in favor of ugly apartment buildings that have not stood the test of time (being, among other things, largely seismically unsafe) and that (when built) neither created more neighborhood diversity nor provided more affordable housing. It is also based on information supplied by the University of California, Berkeley (UCB) on its current expansion plans, which – by increasing the student population dramatically -- will fundamentally alter the character of our City and neighborhoods and will further pit Berkeley's non-student residents against students for affordable housing.

BAHA urges the City Council to table the current resolution in favor of further examination of how best to open avenues for the creation of denser, more diverse and affordable housing while at the same time ensuring that whatever is built honors Berkeley's unique architectural heritage. One key place to start is a current and full examination of Berkeley's current population and residential areas (including racial and economic diversity), who actually is living in or has access to renting in newly constructed apartment complexes, a census of existing under-utilized properties (empty apartment buildings etc.), and the impact of UCB's current Long Range Development Plan (LRDP), which calls for a dramatic increase in students, on available affordable housing. Whatever plan or resolution that is formulated based upon this study should consider the cultural and architectural history of the City and ensure that the unique architectural character of Berkeley is preserved.

Our specific comments are as follows:

1. The Resolution will not effectuate its goal of creating more neighborhood diversity and affordable housing, but instead will create a land rush to convert R-1 parcels into multi-unit condominium buildings or student housing, neither of which will be available to Berkeley's current low-income residents.
2. The language of the Resolution is ambiguous and incapable of being implemented as written, and consequently, if passed, will end up in prolonged litigation that is expensive, pointless, and unnecessary.

3. The Resolution is based on the false assumption that removing R-1 zoning would cause the construction of affordable housing and create racial diversity (as opposed to economic diversity) in the Hills and other current R-1 districts. In all likelihood, removing the R-1 zoning would cause single-family homes to be razed in favor of condos for high income individuals; not creation of numerous rental units for the working poor.
4. The Resolution is based on a misunderstanding of the key purpose behind retaining R-1 zoning, namely designating an area for residential versus commercial purpose; removing residential zoning could result in manufacturing or commercial property use in these areas.
5. Berkeley currently does not have the infrastructure or geographic layout capable of sustaining a huge surge in population and high-rise buildings in all R-1 areas of the City.
6. The Resolution provides no data about who lives where in Berkeley now and how long they have stayed in any given area. It also provides no references to land use studies demonstrating a connection between removing residential zoning and thereby recovering or creating racial and socioeconomic diversity in a city.
7. Even if the Resolution caused the construction of new rental units, recent history demonstrates that new rental housing in Berkeley is being consumed by University; the solution is not to build more rentals that the University will take over but work to limit student population so non-students have chance at securing rental units.
8. Homes in R-1 areas are naturally turning over as owners die or are moved to assisted living. The Resolution would create the scenario where the neighbors of all these houses will find that they are suddenly faced with teardowns and multi-unit condos or rentals as new neighbors. Most people do not invest in single-family homes and risk such major changes in their neighborhood's aesthetics because of unexpected and arbitrary changes in city zoning.
9. The Resolution as proposed will in all likelihood result in demolition of historic and cultural resources in favor of lot-line-to-lot-line condo boxes. Many of the properties in the R-1 districts include large lots with architectural gems, including gardens designed in the early 1900s by nationally recognized landscape architects. Losing these properties, many of which are landmarked, in an ill-conceived and factually unsupported zoning change to carve up the properties and turn them into multi-unit condos or rentals will cost Berkeley many of these important historic assets and with them, part of what makes Berkeley unique.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Carrie Olson". The signature is written in black ink and has a fluid, connected style.

Carrie Olson
President, Berkeley Architectural Heritage Association