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Apartments called vital to future of region

Where are future generations of San Diegans going to live?

One of the few persuasive arguments against urban growth boundaries is that they could limit the amount of moderately priced housing. But Robert Vallera says we're already experiencing that shortage — not because of limits on *where* homes are built, but because apartment construction has been moribund for a decade.

"I'm concerned that the law of unintended consequences will come into play if we limit suburban sprawl but fail to provide more apartments and moderate-income housing," says Vallera, past president and current board member of the San Diego County Apartment Association, which claims 3,000 members, most of them apartment owners.

Indeed, in many European cities, life is enhanced by a plentiful supply of apartments. Meanwhile, in the aging United States, demographic change suggests that smaller and denser housing is better. Empty-nesters in their 50s and 60s can quickly find their four- and five-bedroom homes hard to maintain. More of us are living alone; the fastest growing segment of the apartment population is composed of 35- to 54-year-old single women.

So why the apartment shortage? One reason is that poor planning and developers (at least the type of developers San Diego attracts) have pushed housing construction to the suburban fringes, even into Riverside County, where familiar financing formulas work more efficiently.

"But if we're pushing housing out and still working in San Diego, we're going to dramatically increase smog and traffic, lose open space and reduce the quality of life," says Vallera. "Good planning and good economics intersect. We currently have neither."

His association, therefore, is launching an effort to explore how to increase the supply of higher density apartment complexes within existing urban areas.

"We're not a development lobby," he says. "This isn't necessarily in our economic self-interest. In fact, the greater the shortage, the more rent we can charge." Nonetheless, Vallera thinks it is in everyone's long-term interest to avoid more sprawl.

One central challenge: Find ways to encourage the building of higher density complexes in a region that historically has — with good reason — resisted them. Many complexes

built during the '60s were boxy eyesores. "The parking ratio of one car per unit might have been realistic in '65, but the number of vehicles has risen, leaving those properties somewhat functionally obsolete," Vallera says.

An alternative: Instead of building 300 eight-plexes, create 100 complexes of 24 units each, provide adequate parking, and don't build them in existing residential neighborhoods. Another possibility: As the countless cookie-cutter minimals fade, replace them with a friendlier mix of stores, offices and upper-level apartments.

None of this will be an easy sell. Many folks have come to define the American dream as a three-car garage and a wet bar in suburbia. But apartment designers are already launching a new breed of country-club-like accommodations that feature built-in Internet access, video rental systems and on-site business centers where residents can fax, photocopy and hold conferences.

"Increasingly, people will want to live where they work and live where they play," says Vallera. Or at least that's what some of the most visionary developers believe.

The toughest challenge will be to make sure the next wave of construction of rental housing isn't just at the high end — that it can also house people with moderate incomes.

"We've got to face the social issues, and the threat of sprawl," says Vallera. "The popular thing to do would be to stick our head in the sand and ignore these questions."

Vallera, for one, intends to face them.