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September 26, 2006

Determination on the North Shore

Sierra Sun editorial

June 19, 2006

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Building affordable housing on the North Shore of Tahoe takes a little more than the requisite architectural, construction and infrastructure planning.

In a location that throws up obstacle after obstacle for building projects of any kind — much less affordable projects where every extra dollar spent endangers the viability of the plan — affordable housing proponents have to have a dogged determination to do what's good for the community.

That's why we applaud Alex Mourelatos for keeping alive his vision to create a place for the average North Tahoe worker to find a home.

Going the easy — and lucrative — route would have been simple. Developing plans for a cluster of second homes on his 12 acres in Tahoe Vista and selling the property off to the highest bidder would have left Mourelatos with fewer headaches and a nice bankroll. Likewise, working through the governmental process for approval of a group of mini-mansions on the land, and building them himself, could have equated to millions of dollars in real estate gain.

But Mourelatos, a board member of the Workforce Housing Association of Truckee Tahoe, has that stubborn will required to get workforce housing built in North Tahoe.

When asked at a recent North Tahoe Regional Advisory Council meeting why he didn't just build market-rate homes on his property, Mourelatos had an instant reply.

"There is no way we would let that happen," Mourelatos said. "This community doesn't need market-rate housing, it needs workforce housing."

And that's not just big talk from Mourelatos. By sticking with a blueprint for affordable housing over four years and through several planning iterations, he has shown his money is where his mouth is.

While Mourelatos is scaling down his project because of sheer finances and opposition from neighbors, he still is committed to housing that will be offered to full-time area employees.

Unlike Truckee, which is working hard to incorporate affordable housing into a building boom that is seeing hundreds of homes approved every year, North Tahoe matured in an era where affordable housing was not an issue at the top of everyone's mind.

Now, with limited tracts of undeveloped land and environmental regulations that slow the planning process to a crawl, building affordable housing in North Tahoe takes the commitment and determination that Mourelatos has shown.

Community members who are worried about extra traffic on National Avenue or a "high-density" project in their backyard should remember that they also have a vested interest in affordable housing on the North Shore. As long as they want firefighters to protect their homes, teachers to educate our children and police officers to keep the peace then affordable housing must be built.

Perhaps those neighbors can back affordable housing in Tahoe Vista and assist a landowner who is taking the hard — and less lucrative — road to give workers a home in Tahoe.

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