

# The Almanac

Speakers oppose Habitat proposal  
by [Sean Howell](#)

Belle Haven residents voiced their opposition to a proposed Habitat for Humanity development during a meeting at the Menlo Park Senior Center on Thursday, Nov. 13, criticizing the city for over-burdening Belle Haven in its attempt to increase the number of affordable housing units in the city.

After hearing a proposal by Habitat representatives for 22 three-bedroom duplexes in a 644-by-100-foot strip of open land between existing houses on Terminal Avenue and the Dumbarton rail line, speakers derided the city for considering the land for housing.

"Menlo Park is dumping below-market-rate homes in Belle Haven," said Belle Haven resident Matt Henry, a former planning commissioner. Mr. Henry noted that the development would give the neighborhood over half of the city's below-market-rate housing, though Belle Haven represents only about one-sixth of the city's population.

The city currently has 53 below-market-rate units, 20 of which are located in Belle Haven, according to Community Development Director Arlinda Heineck.

Councilman John Boyle, who attended the meeting, pointed out that the vast majority of the money the city has accepted from the state for re-development projects has been used in Belle Haven, for projects like the Onetta Harris Community Center. The city is required to dedicate at least 20 percent of the re-development money to housing, Heineck said.

The city is also required to build below-market-rate housing under the housing element in the general plan.

If the Habitat proposal passes, the city would donate the land to Habitat for Humanity. In March of 2007, the City Council approved an agreement for SummerHill, a Palo-Alto based developer, to pledge \$2.5 million to the Habitat project in exchange for scaling back the number of affordable housing units in its own development off Willow Road.

Ms. Heineck said she was not aware of any substantial parcels of land owned by the city outside of the re-development district, which also includes the city's light industrial zone east of US-101.

Habitat's proposal calls for a single road to lead into the development, cutting behind existing houses a fact that several speakers said they feared would create a "ghetto."

"I'm disgusted with the city," Belle Haven resident Rose Bickerstaff said, calling it "inhumane" to build houses in a narrow strip that abuts a railroad.

Speakers also argued that Habitat was trying to fit too many houses into the development, which calls for the duplexes to be built in pairs each sharing a wall with another unit, with strips of landscaping in between.

A teacher in the Ravenswood City School District raised concerns that the infusion of residents would over-burden the already struggling district, which includes schools in East Palo Alto and east Menlo Park. And several speakers argued that new housing would only exacerbate traffic congestion in the area.

Mr. Boyle told the packed room at the Senior Center that he had heard the speakers' protests.

"I guarantee you, my thoughts on this project have changed from just an hour ago when I walked in here," Mr. Boyle said, responding to several speakers who said they feared the city wouldn't consider their feedback.

"I want to make sure that people in the community recognize that, although they may be frustrated, the city is listening," Mr. Boyle said in an interview, adding that he had talked with several staff members who were trying to incorporate input from residents in their recommendation to the planning commission. The project won't go before the City Council until it has cleared the planning and housing commissions.